

OLD BURKE, THE DEADSURE DETECTIVE!

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THE PRINCE OF NEW YORK CROOKS.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,

AUTHOR OF "DOUBLE-VOICE DAN" NOVELS, "OLD BURKE, THE MADISON SQUARE DETECTIVE," ETC., ETC.



OLD BURKE FLUNG UP THE REVOLVER AND TOOK A SNAP SHOT AT THE UGLY MUG BEYOND THE FANLIGHT.

The Prince of New York Crooks;

OR,

The Denver Man's Hot Hunt.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,

AUTHOR OF "DOUBLE-VOICE DAN" NOVELS,
"THE GIANT SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN ENCOUNTER ON BROADWAY.

ALL day and all night, storm or shine, year after year, the great artery of New York City, Broadway, is pulsing with life. At midday or midnight the ever restless tide of humanity flows over the indurate stones. On this great thoroughfare all classes and all nationalities mingle. Fashion and frump touch elbows, virtue and vice come in contact, wealth and want walk side by side.

The aspect of the throngs to be seen from Fourteenth to Forty-second streets changes with the various hours of the day and night; but at no time is it more interesting than when the many theaters pour their flood of pleasure-seekers out beneath the white glare of the incandescent lamps.

Then it almost seems that nothing but pleasure and plenty abounds on Broadway. The clubman and the man of fashion stroll forth in opera cloak and immaculate evening dress, chatting, smiling, suave; cigars and cigarettes are lighted, *cafes* are sought, and the night-time seems a time of leisure and luxury.

From the front of the theaters you hear loud voices calling the numbers of the waiting carriages, which roll up to the curb and are entered by dainty ladies in dainty apparel, accompanied by gallant escorts. The casual observer who does not look beneath the surface might think them all members of the Four Hundred, or, at least, of high society; but, in truth, the professional sister of many a dainty-appearing lady who is aided to her carriage by a man of wealth can be seen walking the pave at any hour of the night, flaunting her false diamonds, flashing luring glances from dark-lashed eyes, or praying for one more victim in her callous heart, where pure passion lies forever dead.

The "man about town" is there—as elegant as the finest gentleman of them all, even though he is like the hawk that watches for its prey. In many ways his manners are cultured, but he betrays himself by the brazen and offensive way in which he stares into the face of every fair lady or innocent girl who passes, regardless of the fact that she may be leaning on the arm of husband, father or lover.

The friendly confidence-man may be encountered at any corner, and he is always ready to chat, to take you out and give you a peep at "the town," and he will pull your last dollar if he can lure you into a "little game" with himself and friends. And at the corners, strangest of all, you see the ex-diver-keeper, the one-time criminal and the sleek, well-dressed burglar chatting familiarly with uniformed members of New York's "Finest."

One night, just before the closing of the theaters, a personage that attracted considerable attention strolled leisurely up the street. He was a man at least six feet tall, handsome, finely-formed and straight as an arrow. It was his garb that drew so much notice upon him, for he was attired in a suit of *buckskin*, bleached to a snowy white, patent-leather boots were on his feet, and his head was crowned with a wide-brimmed sombrero. There was a belt about his waist, but it contained no weapons.

By many persons this man was mistaken for Buffalo Bill, but he only resembled Cody by his magnificent physique, for his features were quite in contrast to those of the noted plainsman. He was fully as handsome as Buffalo Bill, but wore no imperial, although a heavy mustache shaded his mouth. His eyes, keen as those of an eagle, seemed to observe absolutely everything within range.

Suddenly two dark figures darted out from a side street and sprung at the man in buckskin, intending to take him by surprise.

It seemed as if the Westerner had eyes in the back of his head, for he wheeled like a flash; his fists shot out, first one and then the other, and—biff! biff! over went the two pavement-highwaymen, knocked down in the twinkling of an eye! It was as neatly done as it could have been by a scientific boxer.

But the assailants had hard heads, for they leaped up instantly and came at the man again, snarling out savage execrations. They separated and attacked on opposite sides, one in front and the other behind.

"Down him, pal!"

"Give him the carver!"

The man in buckskin laughed outright.

"Come up, sons of Belial," he calmly said.

"Come up and take your dose! This is the sport I have been looking for all day. I had begun to think this town dead or sleeping."

Again he knocked one of the men down. As he wheeled on the other, the fellow ducked and lunged under. The Westerner saw a glimmer of steel in the ruffian's fingers.

"So, *that's* your game," he grated, the smile vanishing from his lips, when with quick dexterity out flashed his shiny black patent-leather boot. The toe caught the thug under the chin, lifted him off his feet and landed him flat on his back, the knife flying from his fingers.

"Look out, there!"

The other ruffian was up, and he leaped like a tiger at the back of the man in buckskin. Up went his hand, and a knife was gripped in his fingers.

Then a fourth party stepped in.

A handsome, smooth-faced man, darting forward, caught the wrist of the hand that held the knife. The eyes of the murderous wretch and the new-comer met, and—the would-be assassin stood like an image of stone! For some seconds they remained thus, eye to eye; then the smooth-faced man stepped quietly back, releasing the wrist of the ruffian.

Still the man stood rigid and fixed in the attitude of one about to strike with the up-lifted knife! There was a sleepy look in his eyes, which were, nevertheless, wide open and staring!

The other ruffian lay groaning on the ground.

The crowd that had swiftly assembled gazed at the singular scene in open-mouthed wonder.

"Blow me wide! You've paralyzed him, pard, or my name's not Buckskin Dick!"

It was the Westerner who spoke. He seemed as astounded as any of the throng. He looked inquiringly at the smooth-faced man who had interfered in his behalf, and then turned a wondering gaze on the still motionless thug.

"I prevented Cadger Jim from giving you the length of his knife, my friend," quietly spoke the man of the smooth face.

"You did, pard, and I don't forget it! But what the holy smoke have you done to him?"

"Just robbed him of action until a policeman can gather him in, my friend."

"Two officers forced their way into the center of the increasing crowd."

"What's the row here?" they demanded.

"Here are two ducks for you, Burlew," answered the smooth-faced man. "Trot 'em in, and I think this gentleman will have a charge to put up against them in the morning."

"Oh what's the use of that?" laughed the Westerner. "I'm able to look out for Richard, and these galoots seem to be badly euchered. Just let 'em pass, pard, and in case they trouble me again I reckon I'll fix them so the city won't have to fool with them any more."

"We don't do business that way in these parts, my friend," declared the man of the smooth face. "Cadger Jim and Slinky Mike are very bad men, and it will be for the general health of the community to have them under cover."

The officers promptly secured the two thugs, and one asked what charges would be preferred against them.

"One that will give them something more than thirty days," responded the man who had saved Buckskin Dick, as the Westerner called himself. Then he turned and looked into the eyes of the still rigid and staring Cadger, speaking quietly:

"You are free!"

Instantly the thug's arm dropped and he began to snarl and rave. The policeman shut him up quickly, and the two desperate men were hustled away, without ceremony.

"Pard," said Buckskin Dick, heartily, "I don't know your handle, but I would feel powerful proud to do so."

The smooth-faced man glanced around.

"Come," he muttered, "we will move along and drop these gawking ninnies."

But, when they started to saunter away together, two-thirds of the crowd made a move to follow. Instantly the Westerner's companion wheeled and flashed his piercing eyes over them! It was a singular lightning-flash look, and the throng fell back as if a lightning-bolt quivered in the air before them. Then the man from the West and the owner of the electric eyes walked calmly away, and not a person dogged their steps.

"Stranger," observed Buckskin Dick, "you're a holy terror on trucks. If I had those optics of yours I'd never need to carry a gun."

"They are handy, occasionally," was admitted.

"Handy! I should say so! I don't understand it. You set that galoot with the knife up stiff as a stake, and he never made a wiggle until you told him he might. What's the secret?"

"I don't know myself. I accidentally discovered that I possessed this mysterious power, many years ago, and I have made good use of it in my profession since then."

"What is your profession?"

"I am a detective."

"I suspected it. What's your handle?"

"My handle?"

"Yes—your name."

"Oh! my name is Manton Burke, but I am more often called Old Burke, Old Deadsure, the Dead Sure Detective, or something like that. The crooks have a dozen names for me."

"Old Deadsure! I have heard of you! You are the very man I am looking for!"

"Is that so? Well, you have found me."

"I have a job for you—one that requires immediate attention, so I'm glad of this encounter."

"Sorry; but I happen to have something on hand just now."

"I'll make it worth your while to drop it and take my case."

"You will have to be loaded with wealth, my friend!"

"I am not a beggar; in fact, I own a couple of mines in Colorado, to say nothing of a hotel and a sports' parlor."

Old Burke drew aside.

"Are you a gambler?"

"No, sir."

"But you own a gambling-house?"

"I spoke frankly to you in calling it a sports' resort. In Denver they call it a *club*, as many such fashionable places are called right here in New York, and no one objects. It is not a disgrace to be connected with such a place in the West."

"But I have a disliking for gamblers—fast men—all who live by fleecing others."

"So have I."

"Then why do you hold such a piece of property as a gamblers' parlor, as you term it?"

"For the purpose of entrapping an enemy."

"I don't understand you."

"Come into the Monopole here and sit down. I'll tell you about it."

They entered the cosy little cigar store and wine room and sat down at one of the tables, in the back part. Burke declining to drink, Buckskin Dick ordered cigars. When the weeds were lighted, the Westerner proceeded with his story.

CHAPTER II.

BUCKSKIN DICK'S STORY.

"I ONCE had a wife and happy home," began Buckskin Dick. "That was not many years ago, either. When I married the girl, I thought her purity itself, but we did not live together long. She seemed very young, but I have sometimes fancied she might have been older than I thought. I loved her, and I never asked her age. She was an orphan and alone in the West. Her

brown eyes were trustful and limpid as a fawn's, and it was the pleading in their liquid depths that won my heart. I could not see the poor girl drift to the bad in that wild region, so I made her my wife.

"She was like a sweet and timid child; she was modest and gentle as a dove. I almost fancied her too pure and noble for a common man like myself, and I think I was growing to worship her. It seemed almost a wicked thing to rob her of the charm of maidenhood, even though she became my lawful wife. She confessed she knew not what love was until she met me, and I sometimes doubted that I had revealed its depths to her spotless soul.

"You must understand she was more like my daughter than my wife, even though I am not more than thirty-five at the present time, as you can see. I sheltered and guarded her tenderly. And, the queerest thing of it all was that I knew nothing of her past. Sometimes I spoke of it, but I saw the memory always gave her pain, so I never urged her to tell me her story. I was certain it was a sad one.

"I was running a hotel then. I know I ought to have sold the place and taken her where she would have seen less of the ever-changing throng that came there. It was a mining-camp, and a live one. Perhaps you know the kind of people to be found in such towns. Lawless men were there.

"Lucky Luke was a card-sharp. He was a handsome devil with a bad record. He had killed his man more than once. But he differed from the usual run of gamblers; he was quiet and polished and pleasing in his ways.

"I don't know why I should take to a gambler, but no man knows what his neighbor is in the West, and sometimes gamblers are as honest and square as any. Lucky Luke became my friend. My wife saw him and asked for an introduction. At first I was filled with horror to think of one so fair and pure having aught to do with a gambler; but it was useless to talk with her, as she was determined to know him.

"So I introduced them, fool that I was! I saw nothing suspicious; I suspected nothing. I did not know they were ever together without I was present. Once Luke asked me why I did not sell out my business and take her to some place where she would have the surroundings and advantages she deserved. I felt it my duty to do so.

"Did you ever see a fool? *I was a fool!* I suppose the world is full of fools, but it seems that I was chief among them all.

"One day a man came to the camp to kill Lucky Luke. He had been trailing the gambler for a long time, and found him at last. They met in front of my hotel, and the stranger got the drop. He gave Luke just one minute in which to say his prayers, and then he began to count. At the word three he would fire, and he said he intended to shoot the card-sharp straight through the heart. I haven't a doubt but he really meant to do so.

"Lucky Luke was cool, but white as a sheet. He watched like a hawk for a chance to dodge and draw. Just as the word three was lingering on the tongue of the stranger, a shriek cut the air. My wife darted forward and flung herself on Lucky Luke's breast. The pistol spoke; then she lay limp in the gambler's arms.

"In the excitement that followed, the man who did the shooting escaped. Lucky Luke brought my wife into the hotel in his arms. It was found that she was wounded; but the wound was not dangerous. She had fainted, and when she recovered consciousness, she called wildly for Lawrence, although no one knew whom she meant.

"This opened my eyes in a measure. My heart was hot in my breast, but I did not question or chide her for her strange act. From that hour, however, Lucky Luke and I were no longer friends. I felt that he was dangerous; I felt that my wife was in the greatest peril.

"One day, when she had recovered, I suddenly sold my hotel at a great loss, and that night I forced her to leave the camp with me. We rode away into the blackness of the canyon where the wind moaned. I heard her weeping at my side, and the sound filled my heart with despair. Still, I tried to shut my eyes to the truth, and I prayed

to God that we might see the gambler no more.

"I took her far away to another town. It was a small place and we lived on the outskirts in a small cabin. She was very sad and lonely, but she never spoke of the gambler. I thought all would be well in time.

"One night I came home and found her gone. She had left no word, but something told me what had happened. I lay down and slept better than I had since I saw my wife save Lucky Luke by shielding him with her own body. In the morning I took the trail.

"I followed them far down into New Mexico. The trail grew hot. It was mid-afternoon when I felt a sharp sting in my side and heard the report of a rifle. Then I fell from my horse and lay unconscious for a time.

"When my senses returned, I was lying bound hand and foot, and close by on a bowlder, sat the gambler. He was as calm as possible, and when he saw me look at him, he spoke, saying:

"I'm sorry for this, pard; but I had to do it. It was either you or I. I knowed I have played you dirt mean, but what was to be had to be."

"I cursed him. 'To think I once called you friend!' I cried. 'Dog of a dastard! Snake! You have stolen what was of more value to me than my own life!'

"I had a claim on her before you ever saw her,' he declared. 'It was fate's decree that she should be mine, but the devil made her yours by accident. She never loved you, for she has told me so; but you were very kind to her, and she was grateful. Alone in the world, buffeted, tempted, she married you and found shelter.'

"From which you have dragged her—for what? In a little time you will tire of her, as all betrayers tire, and then she will be flung over and left to die."

"You are wrong, Dick," he soberly asserted. 'She is my natural mate, soul of my soul. I saw her in my dreams every night for a year before I saw her as your wife. I knew I should meet her some day and she would become mine. When I found her married to you, I was tempted to take my own life and end it, as all my hopes seemed dashed to earth. One day I fancied I caught a glimpse of the love-light in her eyes, but I was never sure until she shielded me from death with her own precious little body. Then I knew!'

"But my despair was greater than ever, as she was the wife of one who had befriended me. I swear to you I flipped an eagle that night to see whether I should live or blow out my brains. Had the yellow coin dropped tail side up, I would have blown out my brains just as surely as I am speaking to you now. It fell head up, and I lived to my love.

"Then you vanished so suddenly. At first, I thought I would not pursue. You know I am not a drinking man, but I took to drink. Then it was that something urged me on, and I struck out to find her and possess her—or die!

"I found her at last, and I clasped her in my arms—I told her how passionately I loved her. She was frightened, but she finally confessed she loved me in return. That was all I wanted. I carried her away, even though I knew you would follow and I would kill you."

"He ceased speaking, came and bent over me, and I saw a strange light in his eyes. I read my doom. We were on a shelf of rock; below us roared a sullen river. He dragged me to the edge.

"Drowning is an easy death,' came calmly from his lips; 'and there will be no actual shedding of blood. Tied as you are, you will sink immediately. She will never know I killed you, and I feel that it is right I should put you out of the way, now that you have come between me and what is mine by fate.'

"Then he gave me a minute in which to pray and promptly thrust me over when the time was up. Down I shot, struck the water and knew no more.

"Nearly two years had passed when I came quite to myself again. I woke up to find myself a rich man. I had been dragged from the river and saved from death by a half-blood Indian, but the only thing I seem-

ed to remember was my name. My entire past history seemed to have been blotted out. I took to prospecting, discovered one rich mine, bought out an abandoned shaft and made it pay, purchased a hotel in Del Norte and opened a so-called club room in Denver.

"This may sound like a fairy story, but I will take my oath to the truth of every word. It was during these two years of activity and forgetfulness that I took to wearing buckskin and so came to be called Buckskin Dick. I was regarded as a mystery by those who knew me best, and I was a mystery to myself.

"But, one day it all came back to me! I started up, shouting the name of my treacherous friend. My heart was filled with a fierce longing to hunt him down and to look on the face of my still beloved wife once more. Somehow, I could not believe her so very guilty. I thought of her as a child who had been deluded and led astray by the gambler.

"I arranged my business so I could leave it, and then I set out to search for Lucky Luke. I was fortunate in soon striking his trail, and I found he was practicing his profession in the mining-camps. That was enough, for he was alone and I knew he had abandoned little Lucy.

"I tracked him from place to place. Somehow, he found I was on his trail, and so fled before me. That is, I think he knew I was after him, although he may have fancied it was my ghost, as he could not have surmised of my escape from death in the river.

"The trail grew warm. I did not give him time to rest or sleep. From the Western camps he took to large cities, and he finally came East. Now, I would like to have your aid in nosing him out of his last retreat."

"Where is he?" asked Old Burke.

"In New York City," was the reply.

CHAPTER III.

A STREET SENSATION.

"WHAT will you do when you find him?" asked the detective. "Do you mean to kill him with your own hands?"

"I have not decided on that point; but, what I want most is to learn the fate of my wife. I would wring the truth from his treacherous lips!"

"My dear sir," said Deadsure, quietly, "you have told me a very interesting story, even though it is the commonplace one of the treacherous friend and the false wife, and—"

"Hold! Even now I am not sure my wife was false to me!"

"Eh?" A queer look passed over the detective's face. "Then what do you think?"

"I am almost inclined to believe the devil exercised some vile influence over her—mesmerized her, perhaps."

The man-catcher shook his head doubtfully.

"Not at all likely. What reason have you for believing he possessed such power?"

"None; but I know it exists, for didn't I see you give a wonderful exhibition of it a short time ago?"

"That is all very well, but let me tell you something, sir: In all my career, I have encountered but one man who possessed a power any where near equal to mine. Forty-nine out of fifty so-called hypnotizers are fakirs pure and simple. There is more fraud in this business of mesmerism than anything else I know of—that is straight."

"Still, I half-believe the poor girl was mesmerized—or kidnapped!"

"Why should you? You doubted her before you were deserted by her."

"Doubted—"

"Haven't you confessed you fled to take her where he could not see her? and you acknowledged she was sad and lonely, even though you were near. The gambler came and she vanished with him; he told you she accompanied him of her own free will—"

"Stop! I did not say so! He swore she confessed her love for him, but he did not say she fled with him voluntarily."

"I beg your pardon; you are right; you did not say that. But what can you think?"

"Mr. Burke, I do not allow myself to think

much about that point. I simply want to find Lucky Luke and force the truth from his lips."

"You are an avenger."

"Perhaps you may call me so."

"You may become a murderer. I cannot take a contract to aid you, even though I may wish you success in your search."

"Oh, I'll round up that villain sooner or later! But, I know little of New York—I need your aid, or the aid of some good man. Can't you recommend me to an honest and efficient private detective?"

Old Burke shook his head.

"My dear sir, they are almost as scarce as hens' teeth. I can recommend you to any amount of private detectives who are rascals and ex-convicts and will skin you of your last red copper if you give them half a show, but I am not able at present to name one who is capable and will use you square. Once in a great while, such a man appears, but this life is destructive to honesty and fair dealing. This may sound strange to you, but it is true. A private detective is subjected to all kinds of temptations. Villains offer him big money to do shady work, and he finds he can make dollars by being crooked where he could pick up only dimes if he were honest. The best detectives in New York are on the regular police force."

"But you are a private?"

"I am a retired regular. When I left the force, I did not expect to ever enter the harness again, but, now and then, I will strike some baffling mystery that will pique me and seem to challenge my sagacity. That is more than I can stand, and I soon find myself at work on a clue. Once started, I never stop until the end is reached."

"But," glancing at his watch, "I must spend no more time here. I have an engagement to meet."

Relighting their cigars, they left the little back room, paid for the weeds at the desk and sauntered out upon the street. Old Burke slipped a card into Buckskin Dick's fingers, saying:

"If you want to see me again, here is my address. I shall be glad to hear how things are going with you, and if I can give you a tip any time, depend on me."

The Westerner expressed his thanks, but he had suddenly grown silent and half-suspicious. For a long time he had been possessed of a burning desire to tell his story to some one, but now he had unbosomed himself to the detective, he doubted the wisdom of the act.

How did he know this man was Old Deadsure, the famous detective? He simply had the word of the stranger.

But when he remembered the wonderful stories he had heard of Old Deadsure's remarkable and mysterious power and then thought of the manner in which he had paralyzed Cadger Jim, his doubts faded.

Why had the two thugs attacked him on Broadway, the principal thoroughfare of this great city?

He asked himself the question, and the answer seemed to come like a flash:

"Lucky Luke hired them to do the job!"

They reached the Fifth Avenue Theater just as the throng of pleasure-seekers were pouring into the street. The sidewalk was almost blocked, for a great Italian actress was playing at Miner's fashionable house, and the *bon ton* of New York were enthused over her. In high society circles she was "the rage."

Suddenly, Buckskin Dick started and clutched Old Deadsure's arm with a grip that almost crushed flesh and bone. The detective saw the Westerner was staring and gasping for breath. Following the direction of Dick's eyes, Manton saw an old man and a beautiful young girl just emerging from the theater. The man's hair was almost snowy white, but he still seemed quite hale and hearty, and he was attired in the very best of tailor-made garments. He carried a cane, yet it scarcely seemed that he needed it to assist him in walking.

The girl appeared to be no more than nineteen or twenty years of age. She was simply ravishing in her beauty. Her garments were in a measure concealed by an opera cloak, but they were rich and elegant.

The old man was Jasper Van Dyke, and Nadine Van Dyke, leaning on his arm, was the latest craze in New York society.

Old Van Dyke was a crank, and, since the death of his wife, his daughter, according to reports, had been shut up in some convent, where she was allowed to mature, unsullied by contact with the wicked world.

Then, all at once, old Jasper took a freak and brought her forth and had her taken under the wing of a certain grand dame who ushered her into the mysterious steel-girdled circle of Metropolitan exclusive society. She immediately created a sensation, and in a few weeks had the whole town at her feet.

Jasper Van Dyke's carriage had been called and he was making his way toward it. Nadine leaning on his arm and looking so modest and alluring that the hearts of the rounders literally threatened to disgrace their masters by beating with unusual fervor.

"Look!" gasped Buckskin Dick.

"Where?" asked Old Deadsure.

"There, there—with the old man—see her?"

"Sure!"

"Who is that man?"

"Jasper Van Dyke."

Before Dick could ask another question, a startling thing occurred. Just as Jasper Van Dyke and his daughter reached their carriage, a wild shriek cut the air and a feminine figure came rushing through the crowd and stopped before the old man and the beautiful girl.

"I have found you!" wailed a high-pitched voice. "I knew I would find you at last!"

The speaker was young—she could not have been more than twenty—but her garments were poor and her looks wild. Down her back streamed her long black hair, which made her appearance all the more startling. It was plain that she would be a beautiful girl but for the unhealthy pallor of her skin and the wild light in her dark eyes.

"I have found you!" she screamed, shaking her half-closed hands in the face of Nadine Van Dyke. "I have been searching for you long, but I have found you at last! Did you think me dead? Well, the dead has risen!"

The girl on the old man's arm uttered a shriek of horror and sunk swooning. She was supported immediately, and then the greatest excitement and consternation prevailed. The unreasoning throng pressed and crowded nearer, even though many voices shouted for them to stand off and let the young lady have air.

Nadine was lifted and deposited in the carriage. The old man followed, the door slammed, and away went the carriage.

Where was the wild girl who had created all this excitement? In vain they looked about for her! She had vanished as mysteriously as she had appeared!

What was the meaning of this strange scene?

In vain the spectators asked each other the question. The crowd sifted away, but each spectator had a fruitful topic for conversation and speculation.

"My God!" gasped Buckskin Dick, wiping beads of perspiration from his forehead.

"I have found her!"

"Who?" asked Old Burke.

"My wife!"

"Is that true?"

"Yes; that girl was my lost Lucy!"

"The wild girl?"

"No," was the amazing reply, "the girl who fainted—the one with the old man!"

CHAPTER IV.

DEADSURE DOWN.

"IMPOSSIBLE!" cried the detective.

"It is true!" asserted Buckskin Dick—"true as that I am Buckskin Dick!"

Old Burke shook his head and looked searchingly at his companion.

"Man, you do not know what you are saying. Why, that girl is the daughter of the old gentleman who was with her."

"That makes no difference to me; she is my little one!"

"They move in the highest circles of society."

"That makes no difference; she is my Lucy."

"She can't be your wife; it is impossible; you are deceived by a resemblance."

"Not a bit of it!" persisted the Westerner, decidedly. "That fair and innocent-appearing creature is the girl I married—the girl who deserted me for Lucky Luke, the gambler."

"If you make such an assertion publicly, you will be arrested and detained as a black-mailer or a lunatic."

But the Man in Buckskin was aroused.

"Let them arrest me if they dare! I'll make somebody sore when it is tried! Tell me more about that girl. I was a fool to let her go away! I ought to have confronted her, but the wild creature upset me for a minute."

"It's well she did."

"Why?"

"You would have made a scene."

Dick smiled, grimly.

"Perhaps I might, pard."

"In would have jumped a policeman and away you would have been jerked to the cooler. But she is not lost. You can find her easy enough; all New York knows of Nadine Van Dyke."

"Is that what she calls herself?"

"Yes; she is Nadine—old Van Dyke's daughter."

"The daughter of that old man, do you say? Then, Deadsure, mark it down in your book that there is something crooked here, that will bear your looking after!"

The crowd had dissolved; only a few of the laggards were coming slowly out of the theater. The detective and Dick from Denver walked slowly up the street.

"Stranger," said Old Deadsure, quietly, "I'm half inclined to think you are a little daft. You are the queerest character I have run against lately. You say you hate gamblers, and then you confess you own a gambling-house. You say you will explain why you own the house, but I haven't heard you explain yet. You tell me of your treacherous wife, and then you declare that one of New York's young society buds is she! Your stories seem somewhat shaky."

Buckskin Dick wheeled squarely, and there was a dangerous look on his face.

"Do you mean to call me a liar?" he asked, his voice low and cold.

"If I did—"

"We have a way of settling such matters in the West."

Manton Burke smiled. "What chance would you have with me?"

"Chance! Chance enough to blow you cold!"

"My dear man, I would paralyze you before you could get your gun out! But, there is no reason why we should quarrel. I did not call you a liar; but I did attempt to do you a favor by pointing out to you the fact that your stories, no matter how true they are, would not go down for a cent before a police justice, or with a sharp-witted detective."

Dick was silent for a moment; he seemed thinking.

"You may be right," he finally acknowledged. "I thank you, and offer an apology."

"Accepted."

"I meant to explain in my story how I came to own a sports' parlor in Denver. As I told you, Lucky Luke is a professional gambler. He is also a drifter—goes from place to place. When I had tired of pursuing him and the trail seemed lost, I fancied he was heading for Denver. I skipped ahead, bought the house in another man's name and lay low, hoping he would turn up at my place. That is my explanation."

"And even that would seem fishy to a police justice."

"I care not! What I want to know now is more about this girl who represents herself to be the daughter of that old man."

"There is very little to tell. At the death of her mother, ten or twelve years ago, her father placed her in a convent somewhere, and there she remained until a few months ago. Then he took her out, brought her here to the city and she made her appearance in high society. She is beautiful, charming and cultured, and immediately created a sensation. To-day she has a score of wealthy and aristocratic suitors, each hoping and striving for her hand, so you must see, my dear fellow, how crazy is your notion that this young girl is your absconding wife."

The Man in Buckskin seemed silenced.

He walked along quietly for some moments; then he asked more questions about Nadine Van Dyke and her father. Burke told him many things and added much valuable advice. At Thirty-third street they parted, the Westerner continuing up Broadway, while the detective crossed and entered Trainor's.

A young man came forward and greeted Old Deadsure. He was a handsome fellow of twenty-two or three, dressed fashionably but without display.

"What success, Dare?" asked the detective.

"Not much," was the quiet reply, as they stood by themselves. "I have picked up a few points. The young man is madly in love with his cousin, but she does not seem to reciprocate. As a result, he has taken to drink within the last two weeks and is determined to go to the dogs. He frequents Murdock's. You know what that means."

"Very bad," commented Manton. "But, this is not leading us to the thief."

"I am not so sure."

"What can you mean?"

"Well, I am not ready to say just what I mean, for I really don't know. But I have an idea that if we keep our eyes on Evan Rodman we may tumble head and heels over the thief."

"You insinuate—"

"Nothing."

"But, you seemed to hint—"

"I didn't mean to hint anything. I sometimes have impressions, and this is an impression of mine."

"I had rather you would work on facts instead of impressions. I placed you in a position to watch and mingle with the best society in New York simply because it was impossible for me to occupy such a position. I am too well known. No one could imagine you as a detective or connected with a detective, and that makes you dangerous and valuable. The people we care for never come here, and so I have you meet me at this bar. Next time, we will meet somewhere else."

Dare nodded.

"Next time we meet, I hope to have something of importance to communicate. But, I'm treading on dangerous ground."

"How so?"

"I am half in love."

"With whom?"

"Nadine Van Dyke."

"Don't be foolish, Dare."

"I don't mean to be, but it is not an easy thing to meet such a charming girl and have her smile on you without getting stirred up a little. She is the dearest, most innocent little in all the world! If I were a millionaire's son, I would make a desperate play to win her. As it is—"

"You must not go too far. Everything would be ruined if old Jasper should take a notion to investigate your ancestry. He might be indignant at such methods on my part, even though he instructed me to resort to any artifice to detect the thief. Make love to her enough to keep in her favor, but have judgment."

"And by making mock love, I may get all broken up," protested Dare, with a rueful smile.

Old Burke smiled.

"This is the usual way," he said.

"While you are making love to her, you may be able to aid me in fastening the crime on the mysterious thief. Keep your eyes open. You may watch Evan Rodman as closely as you please, but must watch others, as well. As soon as you learn anything of importance, communicate with me. Don't delay, for delays are dangerous. That's all."

A few moments later, they left Trainor's and parted on the street.

Neither of them saw a figure that came skulking out at the door and watched them with a pair of keen eyes, and they did not hear the voice that muttered:

"I'm dead onto youse, my coveys! I couldn't jest ketch all youse said, but I did git enough ter know ye're layin' fer de boss! Dis night pulls two tenners from him, or me name ain't Biff Jones."

He followed the detective, sneaking along the street with the cat-like tread of the professional shadower.

Old Burke had not told Dare, nor the

young man referred to, Evan Rodman, anything about Buckskin Dick and his startling assertion that the daughter of old Jasper Van Dyke was a married woman and a false wife. The detective himself did not know exactly what to think of the Westerner and his remarkable declaration.

The Deadsure Detective was engaged in seeking for a mysterious thief who had been troubling New York's best society for some months. So skillfully were the operations of this unknown crook that the best detectives had failed to detect him, and Old Burke only took the case when he found others of his profession giving it up in despair.

The thief usually accomplished his work at some reception or ball where there was sure to be a crush of elegantly-attired gentlemen and ladies. The latter were invariably the victims of the light-fingered crook, and the way he captured brooches and necklaces of valuable stones simply astounded his victims. His skill and craft were something marvelous.

Nadine Van Dyke had been the last known person to suffer. At a reception given in her father's own house she was despoiled of a necklace worth at least ten thousand dollars, and the rage of old Jasper knew no bounds. The old gentleman offered a large reward for the detection and arrest of the thief.

Manton Burke left Trainor's and turned down Sixth avenue. He did not walk many blocks before he rounded a corner and faced toward the West Side. He walked along briskly.

All at once, a heavy object came flying through the air, striking the detective in the head. Down upon the pavement went the stricken crook-hunter, and there lay in the shadows of the deserted street, making no move to rise, while Biff Jones uttering an evil laugh glided forward.

CHAPTER V.

DOOMED TO THE BLACK-HOLE.

"Dis cove hain't fergot how to t'row a rock!" chuckled Biff, as he bent over the motionless man, who lay outstretched on the stones, face downward. "Wonder if it cracked his nut?"

His fingers ran over the unfortunate man's head, and the sense of touch seemed quite equal to that of sight as far as he was concerned.

"Don't t'ink the head is split. Guess I just kind of keeled him over silly, that's all. He's bleeding some, but that don't count."

Then, with the instinct of the thief upon him, Jones began to rummage through the pockets of his victim. Keen though the crook was, he did not see a crouching, misshapen figure that came skulking forward.

All at once, a pair of bony hands clutched him with the grip of a vise, and a voice hissed in his ear:

"Ah-ha!"

Jones came near uttering a shriek of fear, but found himself held helpless by those unyielding fingers, yet succeeded in twisting his head around until he could look into the hideous face of the strange creature who had pounced upon him.

"Hump!"

"Ah! it's Biff!"

And Biff was released as suddenly as he had been seized.

"How happens it youse are creepin' round, Hump Bodley?" he demanded.

"If you know where you are, there's no reason for that question," was the half-contemptuous retort.

"Where I am? Holy smoke! Dis is de street! And dat—why, dat's de ranch!"

"Have you got it through your head?" sneered the deformed creature. "It is my place to be here. But, what are you doing, can I ask?"

"I've just downed dis bloke. He's bad stuff. Know who dis is?"

"How should I? He is on his face."

"Well, dis is Old Deadsure, the detective!"

The deformed uttered a little cry of astonishment, shrinking back, as if in fear.

Jones laughed.

"He can't hurt ye now, Hump, fer I has dropped him wid a sock."

At which announcement the other gasped a knife and seemed about to leap upon the unconscious detective, but Jones caught him about the body and prevented the act.

"Slow, slow!" warned Jones. "Remember where we are! I wouldn't have popped him over if I had noticed de house right here at hand. 'Don't do anything to bring der whole police force 'bout our ears. See?"

Snarling like a wild beast, the deformed thrust the blade out of sight.

"What'll we do?" he asked.

"Take him in," suggested Jones, struck by a sudden thought—"into the ranch."

"Not much! the boss'd murder us for it!"

"Not after I have told him a few t'ings, me duck. De boss'll call it a good job. I'll take de responsibility. Ketch holt and help me git him in at the basement. We'll sack him along between us and pretend he's drunk if we're seen. Lively, Hump! I'll take the consequences; dat's straight."

They lifted the unconscious man between them and bore him rapidly to a dark and silent house that stood next to one with red curtains, behind which the lamps were blazing, a piano rattling and voices calling.

Not a person appeared to question the two rascals, and they dragged their motionless victim down the stone steps into the darkness of the basement alcove beneath the stairs that led to the front door.

There the fingers of the hunchback found a hidden button, which he pressed in a peculiar manner, thus signaling to some one within. In a few seconds, a voice called through a speaking-tube:

"Who? what? why?"

Putting his lips to the tube, the deformed sent back this reply:

"Hunch. Come in. Important."

Snap! the door opened.

Into the darkness of the place the two toughs dragged the detective. They knew every inch of the way, and so they needed no light. Carefully was the door closed behind them, and Old Burke was in a trap from which he might not escape with his life.

When the detective recovered consciousness, his first sensation was that of a terrible pain in his head. He tried to lift his hand, only to discover that both were bound behind him.

What had happened? He asked himself the question in vain. The last thing he could remember was of walking along the street and feeling a sudden terrible shock, as if the walls of a house had fallen upon him. After that all was blank.

Where was he? Utter darkness surrounded him on every hand and he could hear no sounds of life. Slowly and surely the realization that he was in a trap came to him. He did not wonder at it, for he knew the city was full of crooks who were his enemies, but he fell to speculating on how it had all come about.

After a time, he lifted up his voice and called aloud. Almost immediately, he was answered by the appearance of a rounded and crouching figure, enveloped in a sort of cloak that concealed in a great measure its outline. On its head, the figure wore a cowl and hood. A black-gloved hand carried a small brass lamp.

"So, so!" grated a voice from beneath a cowl. "You have come round, eh? Well, that only makes us more trouble. If you had acted decent and died, it would have saved us the trouble of feeding you the rest of your life, which will probably be brief. As it is, we'll have to shut you in the Black Hole and keep you there."

"That is interesting information!" declared Old Deadsure, speaking cheerfully, even though it seemed his brain would burst with the terrible strain. "What sort of a place is this Black Hole, anyway?"

"A place where we chuck people who give us too much trouble," replied the mask.

"A sort of dungeon, eh?"

"Sure; and it is dark as eternal night. Critters don't live long after being put in there."

"That is interesting for me, surely! But, whv am I to be dumped into this Black Hole?"

"You're Old Deadsure, ain't yer?"

"I am."

"Well; you've bothered this gang before now, and we have reason to believe we'll be a great deal safer if we put you where you won't bother us any more. If you live long enough, we may take a notion to let you out when the gang skips the town. It may be interesting for you to know you are in the hands of the Snake Gang, or the West Side Clan, as we call ourselves."

"A desperate band of burglars, safe-blowers and sand-baggers!"

"Exactly! You have a way of bothering such people, so you can understand why they want to put you where you'll let 'em alone."

"It is very cute of them, for, now that I am onto them, I might take a notion to break up the clan before it could break up and skip, as you suggest."

The detective was remarkably cool. All the while, as he lay there, he was trying to catch the eye of the man in the cloak and cowl. In this he was not successful. The fellow probably knew of Old Deadsure's wonderful power, and so carefully avoided glancing at those piercing black eyes.

Suddenly a bell tinkled somewhere. The disguised man started, crying:

"The chief has arrived!"

Then he hastened from the place, leaving the captive in darkness once more.

Burke had seen enough to convince him he was in a cellar-like place and that the cellar was entered from the basement of a private house. He wondered if his voice could be heard outside if he lifted it in a shout, but quickly decided it could not, else the desperadoes would have taken the precaution to gag him.

He lay for some little time, speculating on the situation. Finally, a door swung open, allowing a gleam of light to penetrate the place, and into the room marched seven men, all of whom were cloaked and cowed, the disguise being effectual. Each man held a small brass lamp in his hand.

The leader seemed to be the chief, for, unlike the others, his cloak and cowl were of snowy white instead of raven black.

The men formed around the captive, who was stretched on the bare stone floor. Not a word was spoken for some moments, but the chief finally broke the silence:

"Manton Burke," he said, sternly, "what have you to say for yourself?"

"Not a blessed word," was the reply. "I am too ashamed of myself to make any excuses. A man who is caught in such company had better keep still."

"You are inclined to be facetious, but we will take some of the fun out of you," came from beneath the white cowl. "You are on trial for your liberty, if not for your life, and these six men are to pronounce your sentence."

"What's the use of such nonsense?" asked Burke. "The sentence is decided on already, and you may as well go ahead with your fun."

But the band made a show of carrying out a trial, at the end of which the man in white pronounced the doom of the detective, condemning him to permanent confinement in the "Black Hole."

"If you mean business, why don't you go about it in a business-like way?" asked Old Deadsure.

The chief waved his hand.

"Remove him from the chamber!" he commanded.

CHAPTER VI.

DEADSURE HIMSELF AGAIN.

SOME of the cowed crooks caught hold of the detective and dragged him to another part of the cellar, where he was dumped down in a heap.

"That's right," said Manton, grimly; "never mind my feelings. Handle me any way you please; I won't kick."

"I don't see as you have much of a show for kicking," retorted one of the men. "You're as good as in the Black Hole."

"I have been in as tight places as this several times before."

"You were not dealing with the Clan Gang. We never make any breaks."

"Say, I'll bet you two to one I slip you yet."

Old Deadsure was talking for the purpose of getting the other to speak freely. The

detective had a fine ear, and he seldom forgot a voice any more than he did a face. If he set his mind to remember a man's voice, he was certain to know it when he heard it again.

By this, it will be seen, Manton had not given up hope of escaping, for all of his desperate situation. More than once, when at the very door of death, he had found a way to evade the grim destroyer.

"You've got good grit," said the cowl; "but grit won't count in this case. Old Deadsure! Ha! ha! ha! You are dead sure of remaining under cover a long time to come. That must make you feel jolly! We'll leave you to contemplate the situation. By-by."

"Ta-ta."

They left him in the darkness. Although he had not given up hope, his thoughts were far from pleasant.

"If I do manage to get away," he muttered, "I'll never rest till I have broken up this gang. I am sure it is a band of no ordinary rascals, and I couldn't do a greater service to the city than by wiping it out of existence. They fancy they have me dead to rights; but there's many a slip."

He worked at his bonds, but it was not long before he discovered they had done a thorough job in tying him. His efforts only drew the cords tighter.

The time dragged slowly. He wondered why they had not cast him into the Black Hole without delay.

"If I only had a chance to use my hypnotic power!"

Finally, he heard the gang in the adjoining room, and, by listening closely, he discovered they were engaged in some business concerning him. In a few moments, this matter was settled.

"Number Four," said the voice of the chief, soberly, "it is your duty to cast this hound of the law into the Black Hole and see that he receives food and water once a day as long as he lives there. You have been duly selected by lot, having an equal chance with your comrades. Are you ready for the work?"

A steady voice replied:

"I am."

"Good! You will find the victim in the cell of the condemned. Make haste."

Old Deadsure set his teeth and waited, once more mentally exclaiming:

"If he only brings a light!"

His heart gave a leap of satisfaction when he saw the glimmer of an approaching lamp. In a moment, the man entered, bearing the light in his left hand. He was attired in black, like the seven mock judges.

Manton lay quite still and watched. The man with the lamp came and stood over him, but did not look him in the eyes.

"Are you ready?" asked a voice beneath the hood.

"Not yet," replied Old Burke.

"Well, there's no more time to waste. It's tough lines to be shut in such a place, but I don't reckon you will live long there. Think of that and be happy."

"What do you mean to do with my body, if I die on your hands?"

"That can be of no interest to you."

"You are mistaken; it is of the greatest interest."

"Why?"

"I have hopes it will be found and my death avenged."

"Then you may as well abandon those hopes, for we're too sharp for that."

The guard now placed the lamp on a small stool, so the light fell full and fairly on Manton Burke's face. That was just what the detective had hoped for. He was gazing keenly toward the dark eye-holes in the crimson hood.

The cowed crook stepped to the wall and opened a hidden door, from beyond which came a breath of cold air that made Manton shudder. Then the guard came back and bent down to grasp the detective.

Would the fellow never look him in the eye?

"In you go!"

"Hold on: I have a question to ask."

"Make haste about it; I have no time to waste."

"Say?" Manton spoke in a cautious whisper.

"What?"

"How much will you take to let me off?"

"I am not a fool."

"That's why I am ready to bargain with you."

"That's why you can't bargain with me. I know the value of my own life, and it would mean sure death to me if I let you escape. Besides that, there is no possible way for you to get out of here; there is only one exit from this cell, and the boys will watch that until I come forth."

At this instant the impatient voice of the chief called from the other room:

"Number Four."

"Yes, Sir Chief."

"Have you done your work?"

"Not yet."

"Make haste; do not dally longer. There are other matters that require our attention this night."

Again Number Four started to drag Manton into the terrible Black Hole.

At that instant Old Deadsure succeeded in catching the eyes beyond the twin openings in the crimson cowl.

The guard suddenly became rigid as a statue.

He was chained motionless by Manton Burke's wonderful power!

"Steady!" softly whispered the detective.

"Take out your knife—quick!"

The disguised crook actually obeyed!

"Right," added Manton. "Now, cut my bonds!—Be lively!"

The fellow did so; he was unable to resist! In a moment, the strange detective was free.

For an instant Old Deadsure hesitated, and then he softly commanded:

"Drag me into the Black Hole," the hypnotized man grasped Manton by the collar and dragged him toward the open door of the dark dungeon.

At that instant the wonderful detective saw one of the men in the other room glance into the death cell. Deadsure hung limp and apparently helpless in the grasp of the crimson covered executioner. The man outside drew back and disappeared, apparently satisfied.

In another moment, Manton was on his feet.

"Off with that cloak and cowl!" he commanded. "Be swift and silent!"

The order was obeyed.

"Hello, Limber Tim," whispered Old Burke, as the face of the chosen executioner was exposed. "I fancied I knew you, and I was not mistaken. Stand there until I can see how this rig fits me."

With deft fingers, he donned the cloak and cowl, and in a few seconds, he looked the very image of the executioner.

Looking beyond the open door, he saw a narrow platform of earth and stone, beyond which was the yawning mouth of a dark hole. How deep this was he had no means of knowing.

"Step in there and stand still near the hole."

Again the man obeyed without demur.

The Deadsure Detective grasped the heavy door and closed it, shutting the crook into darkness of that horrible place. He knew there was a possibility that Limber Tim would fall into the Black Hole, but Manton was working for his life, and it was not probable the fall would injure the crook.

The detective took up the lamp. Back to the adjoining room he boldly strode.

The members of the Clan were sitting about in a half-circle, plainly awaiting Limber Tim's return. The chief arose as he appeared.

"Have you placed the captive in the Black Hole?"

"I have," replied Manton, imitating the voice of Limber Tim.

"Then give me the key."

"The key? What key?"

"The key to the hidden door, of course. No one has charge of that but me. Each time you take food and water to this captive sleuth-hound you are to call for it, and so I shall know you have attended to your duty. The key, I say."

"I must have left it in the lock," said the disguised detective. "I will get it."

Before Old Burke could make any move, a sudden cry broke from the hidden lips of a rounded, crouching figure, and then one of the crows darted forward.

"Look!" he shouted, leaping upon a chair. With a swift snatch he tore the crimson cowl from old Deadsure's head! The detective's trick was exposed!

CHAPTER VII.

MANTON IN MURDOCK'S.

HUMP BODLEY had penetrated the deception, and he had unmasked Old Burke.

The astonishment of the crooks was beyond description. For the moment, they were struck dumb and motionless.

The man they believed secure in the Black Hole was before them.

That moment of inactivity gave Manton his opportunity, and he improved it.

With one blow of his iron fist, he sent the miserable hunchback spinning through the air. It happened that the body of the deformed struck the chief of the Clan fairly in the middle, and the two went crashing to the floor.

Snatching up the chair on which Bodley had leaped, Old Deadsure waded into the remaining crooks.

Right and left he sent them reeling, uttering shouts of defiance as he beat them down. Taken thus by surprise, they made a feeble resistance.

Almost before the desperadoes realized what had happened, Old Deadsure was gone! He had torn open a door and vanished.

"After him!" shrilly screamed Hump Bodley, staggering to his feet. "Don't let the devil escape! It'll mean ruin to us if he gets away!"

Weapons appeared in the hands of the dazed crooks, and they started in pursuit of the vanished detective.

As well might they have sought to overtake a cyclone. Out of the cellar shot the strange man. His fingers seemed to know just where to find every bolt and bar, and not a door checked his progress. He was quickly on the street, and a short, sharp run took him to an alley down which he scooted.

The crooks could not pursue him to the street until they removed their singular outer garments, and that slight loss of time was quite enough to give Manton all the start he required. Once fairly away from that vicinity, he felt that he could laugh at the baffled villains.

At first, Manton thought of bringing the police down on the den without delay, but he had tried the trick in many other cases, and he had never yet known it to prove of any worth. The scoundrels were alarmed and they would vanish from the den in a very few moments. If the police descended on the place, a deserted dive would be found, nothing more.

"They will hear from me again," muttered the detective, grimly. "It is now a case of war between us, and I am bound to make it mighty interesting for these Snakes as they call themselves. I am getting my hands full of business, that is a fact."

Thirty minutes later, he dodged in at one of his favorite resorts, and when he came out again, his appearance was changed completely. He was no longer the smooth-faced detective, but was, instead, a rather handsome and sporty-appearing individual. He wore a handsome blonde mustache, while his hair was brown and curly. A silk hat sat on his head, and his attire was of the latest and most approved pattern down to the patent leathers on his shapely feet. He sauntered along, smoking a fragrant cigar and carrying a crook-headed cane in his gloved hand.

He was soon on Sixth avenue near Thirty-third street, that quarter which is awake and stirring the entire night. He brushed against slinking beggars, roystering youths and female night-hawks of the great Tenderloin Precinct, but none of them commanded his attention. He was heading toward Murdock's, the famous resort of that quarter.

Entering this place, which is called a chop-house and restaurant, but is really a drinking dive countenanced by the police, he looked about in search of some one.

The tables strung along on either side of the room were surrounded by the men and women who patronized the place. All classes and kinds, barring respectable wo-

men, were to be seen. The gambler, the dandy, the millionaire's son, the newspaper man and bank clerk on a "quiet lark" were gathered about the tables, drinking, smoking and chatting with the women who frequent Murdock's after eleven o'clock each night.

Any one might think, to casually glance at the laughing throng, that all were bent on innocent enjoyment and that they were having a really good time. But there was something forced about the laughter of the women and something unnatural about that of the men. The mirth was not that of the open-hearted sunny day sort; instead, it was the merriment of the night and the wine-clated heart. Glances that passed from eye to eye were full of secret and nameless meanings.

Far down at the lower end of the room the roystering was at its height, but there one young man sat alone in a distant corner, an open bottle of wine before him, an unlighted cigar in his fingers, while he stared straight ahead and seemed to see nothing. He was a handsome fellow, and somehow he did not look like the regular frequenters of the place. He was well-dressed, everything about him being spotless and immaculate, and his face showed his good breeding.

"I fancied I would find him here," muttered Old Burke, as he walked toward the table.

He sat down in a chair opposite the young man, picked up the bottle of wine and poured out its remaining contents into a water glass that happened to be on the table, and then threw the wine on the floor.

With a look of astonishment in his brown eyes, the young man had watched the cool proceeding, but he now uttered an angry exclamation.

"Look here, my friend!" he cried; "will you be kind enough to tell me what you are at? You act as if you paid for that wine!"

"Cool and easy, Rodman!" came quietly from the disguised detective's lips. "Don't get excited."

And that only aroused the young man all the more.

"Excited!" he exclaimed. "I should say I have good reason to be excited! I don't fancy getting into a brawl in *this* place," with his contempt for his surroundings expressed plainly enough; "but you have deliberately insulted me. You must pay for that wine and apologize."

"Must?"

"Yes. Order another bottle of wine at once."

"I'll do nothing of the kind."

The young man had been drinking freely, and he was in no condition to endure this, even though he happened to be in a place where he did not fancy drawing attention to himself. He half arose and reached across the table to grasp Manton's nose with his thumb and fingers, but a single word came from the detective's lips:

"Stop!"

Their eyes met, and Evan Rodman remained chained in that singular pose, seeming turned to marble.

"Sit down!"

The young man sunk back in his seat. "You have been drinking more than is good for you, and that is why I spilled the rest of the wine. You will drink no more to-night."

"I—I—"

"You will do exactly as I say."

"What right have you—"

"The right of *might*! You can't drink if you want to, for all wine will be bitter to you from now until morning."

"Bitter! Bah! What kind of a story are you trying to make me believe?"

"You don't believe it?"

"No."

"Here, waiter, bring a small bottle of Extra Dry, Mumm's."

Old Burke gave the order and paid for the wine when it was placed upon the table. The waiter opened it and turned out two brimming glasses.

"Drink," invited Manton, a strange twinkle in his powerful eyes—"drink, and see if I do not speak the truth."

"All right," smiled Rodman. "Here's to you!"

But when he had taken a mouthful, he

suddenly wheeled and spat it all out upon the floor, making up a horrible face.

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "The stuff is doctored! You are standing in with the waiter!"

"Nothing of the sort," asserted Manton, as he touched a young man near at hand on the shoulder and asked him to drink a glass of the wine and see if anything ailed it. "This will show whether it is doctored or not."

"The young fellow tossed off the Mumm's without winking, smacked his lips and observed:

"Prime stuff! Hits a fellow where he lives!"

"What is the matter with me?" gasped Evan, sinking back in his chair.

"I told you you had drunk too much already, and now I have shown you I was right."

"You have bewitched the wine!"

"Nothing of the sort."

"Then you have east a spell over me! I feel queer! Man, you are a sorcerer!"

The detective smiled.

"I am one of the most harmless men alive, and I am your friend, Evan Rodman."

"You know me?"

"Yes. Otherwise, I would not be wasting my time here. I know you for a likely young man who has been making a fool of himself lately."

"Sir, I—"

"Now keep perfectly quiet. There is no reason why you should lift your voice and draw attention upon us."

"But I am not used to being called a fool!"

"Possibly not; and that is why the truth strikes home when it does come. I wouldn't call you that if I didn't mean it. You are not naturally lacking in sense—"

"Thank you!" scornfully.

"But of late you have been, taking a pace that shows you have dropped a cog somewhere. Till about two weeks ago, you never drank a drop of intoxicating liquor in all your life. Of a sudden, you take to drinking and frequenting such places as this. If you were in your right mind, no money could tempt you to be seen night after night in Murdock's and like dives."

Evan Rodman's face was flushed and for a moment he looked ashamed. However, he put on a bold front, saying, somewhat harshly:

"You seem to know a large amount about my business!"

"That is right; I *do* know a great deal about your business."

"Who are you?"

"Your friend."

"I doubt it."

"I will convince you it is true before long. In the mean time, I want you to tell me exactly why you took to drink."

"Well, you will want!"

"You will tell me."

"Not any!"

"Yes you will!"

Once more their eyes met. An electric spark seemed blazing in the orbs of the mysterious detective.

"You will tell me about it," he repeated, in a commanding manner.

Evan Rodman bowed mechanically.

"I will," he said.

"Good! This is no place for such a talk; your words might be overheard by ears for which they were not intended. We will go out to a quiet little hotel on Twenty-eighth street. Come."

He arose, and Evan did likewise, seeming powerless to resist the wonderful influence brought to bear upon him. They made their way from the place and were soon on the sidewalk. There Manton quietly took the young man's arm, and they walked along together like two old friends.

Neither saw the skulking shadow that dogged their steps.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STORY AND A SHOT.

EVAN RODMAN and Manton Burke were seated at opposite sides of a table in a secluded room of the little hotel.

"We will not be overheard here," said the

detective. "Now, tell me why it is you have taken to drinking lately."

The young man seemed to struggle savagely with himself, and, plainly with an effort, asked:

"Why should I tell you this?"

"Because I want to know," was the cool retort.

"But you are an utter stranger to me."

"Am I? Did you ever hear of Old Deadsure, the detective?"

"Yes."

"I am Old Deadsure."

Evan looked doubtful.

"You are not the man employed by my uncle to discover the person who robbed Nadine of her diamonds," he asserted.

"Oh, but I am!"

"I have seen this detective, and you are not he."

"Did you fancy Old Deadsure always went about looking exactly the same? Didn't you imagine he ever resorted to a disguise? Do you know he has the reputation of being the most expert man alive in the matter of altering his appearance?"

"But—but, he is older than you."

"It is not a hard trick to make one's self look younger than he is. I donned this sporty disguise because I have enemies out to-night, and plenty of them. My foes are thick. I thought I should find you in Murdock's, so I put on a rig that would be appropriate for the place, which, as you know, is much frequented by sports. You were astounded by the easy manner in which I handled you and made you do exactly as I willed. Have you never heard that Old Deadsure possesses such a power?"

"Yes, yes! By Jove! I believe you are really the detective!"

"Of course you do. Now, go on with the story. You have been balked in some love affair, and, like a callow youth, are drinking to drown your sorrow."

Evan flushed.

"You have hit pretty near the mark," he confessed.

"Who is the heartless girl?"

"My cousin."

"Nadine Van Dyke?"

"Yes."

"Then you are in love with her?"

"I am—madly, wildly in love with her! She is the most divine creature God's sunshine ever rested upon!"

"Great smoke! but you *have* got it bad! This case is serious!"

"I fancied at one time," Evan continued, "that she cared for me a little."

"She encouraged you?"

"She allowed me to kiss her."

"That was certainly encouragement. Perhaps they were only cousinly kisses?"

"No, no!" the young man exclaimed, his face hot with his warm blood; "they were something more! Cousins never kiss that way because they *are* cousins."

Manton drummed lightly on the table, a queer look on his face. After some moments of silence, he said:

"I believe your cousin has lately returned from a convent somewhere?"

"Yes."

"I wonder if she learned to flirt and kiss in a convent?"

"I don't think she ever learned those things; I think they come natural to her. And yet, here is that infernal Mr. Smith—"

"What's that?"

"Nothing." Evan was confused.

The detective turned and faced the young man squarely.

"It is useless for you to attempt to keep anything from me," he declared. "I have the power to make you tell me all, but I had rather you would do so of your own free will. I see you are inclined to hold something back. I want the whole truth. You know I have tackled a hard case in this diamond robbery business, and I may get a pointer from something you would not imagine of any benefit to me."

Evan sat with compressed lips for some seconds, and then he retorted:

"Well, I don't know any reason why I shouldn't tell you. I am not ashamed of it. Before Nadine appeared, I imagined I loved Wilma Wilcox. Wilma is a bright, true-hearted and trusting little girl, and she fancied me. I had even gone so far as to declare my affection for her and ask her to

become my wife. She promised to marry me next year, and our engagement was sealed with a ring.

"Then Uncle Jasper went away. He did not tell me where he was going or why. He was always queer. When he returned, Nadine was with him, and he introduced her as my cousin, whom I had never before seen. With the first glance of her glorious eyes, I thrilled to my soul. There was something about her that sent the hot blood tingling through my veins.

"Well, we were much together, and with each passing day I grew more and more interested in her. She was so dainty, so delicate, so perfect! It seemed to me that never in all her life had she touched anything that had contaminated her in the least, and for that reason she was unlike other girls to me.

"Except Wilma, the other girls I know are all too wise—they were born and reared in the city, and they have seen far too much of life. Beautiful though they may be, some of them seem to know as much about the wiles and ways of the world as I do. I don't like that. It robs a girl of something when she knows so much about everything.

"Nadine was so innocent I was really afraid of her at first. Gradually, however, I grew more at ease in her company; but, if you will believe it, uncle actually seemed jealous of her, and he would not permit us to be much together. She petted and fondled him in her childish way, and he seemed to adore her. One day I asked him point-blank why he tried to keep us apart.

"Look here, Evan," he answered, 'you're a good deal like other young men of to-day, and though Nadine is your cousin, I do not trust you fully. I'm afraid you will fall in love with her, and the marriage of cousins is something I abhor. If you loved her and marriage were impossible, you might get desperate and go to the dogs. Look out for yourself, my boy; I will look out for Nadine.'

"I did not tell him I loved her already, but I knew the whole truth from that moment. She was all the world to me. Without Nadine, life would be a dreary waste. Then I thought of Wilma, to whom I was engaged, and the thought made me a coward for the moment. That night I obtained a few moments with my cousin in the dusk of the unlighted parlor. She had been singing and lightly fingering the keys of the piano. In some way I got hold of her hand, and the touch made me mad. In a moment my arm was about her neck and my lips pressed to hers. That kiss dazed me and made my brain reel. I told her how much I loved her, and she did not repulse me, although not a word came from her lips. Then Uncle Jasper came in and interrupted us.

"The next day I broke with Wilma. It was a heartless thing to do, for the dear little girl really loved me, but I was ready to do anything for Nadine. I felt like a dog when it was over.

"That afternoon, when I entered the parlor, I found my cousin talking with a handsome, bearded man. She introduced him to me as Mr. Smith. I instantly took a strong aversion to him, and I wondered how she came to know him. When he was gone, I sought to question her, but she cut me short in a way that took my breath. Then I tried to make love to her again, but she would not have it.

"Father has forbidden it," she said. 'He told me I mustn't allow you to kiss me any more.'

"But, Nadine, I love you!" I cried. 'You are the most ravishing little girl in all the wide world, and I love you for all of Uncle Jasper!'

"And that is very wicked," she retorted. 'I can't allow you to love me, cousin mine. Find some other girl to love.'

"Great Scott! I have just broken with another girl for you! We were engaged, and I have broken the engagement!"

"Then she lectured me and told me to go right back and make up with Wilma. And that only made me love her more madly. I grew jealous; I accused her of loving Mr. Smith; I stormed and almost threatened. It was all useless.

"After this, I grew suspicious. Mr. Smith did not come to the house any more, but I took to watching Nadine, and I discovered she met him secretly. Once I saw them to

gether in the parlor of the Fifth Avenue Hotel; once they met on the platform of an Elevated Station. But when I tried to follow Smith, he vanished like a shadow—gave me the slip with ease.

"Yesterday, I had another quarrel with Nadine. I was desperate. She was coming down to dinner, and I stopped her on the stairs. Great Heaven! she was distracting! Her flesh was pure as marble, and the natural tint of healthy girlhood was in her cheeks. I could not restrain myself; I caught her to my breast and kissed her again. Never will I forget the look she gave me.

"Nadine," I whispered, 'you must—you shall be mine! I love you, and I will make you my wife! Your father has no right to keep us apart!'

"Then she calmly and coldly told me she would not marry me if Uncle Jasper gave her permit. I thought of Smith, and I charged her with loving him. She confessed it.

"That is all. I am desperate, and you can understand why I have been drinking so much to-night. Until my first quarrel with her, two weeks ago, I never tasted liquor. I have been drinking since then, partially to help me forget how wretchedly I used Wilma and partially to keep me from going mad over Nadine. I set out to-night with the deliberate intention of filling up, and then—"

He paused abruptly, a dark and determined look on his face. The fire of the wine he had swallowed was in his brain, and mad thoughts filled his head.

"You have a great deal to learn, young man," said Old Burke, calmly. "You are badly broken up over this girl, and I scarcely wonder. But you are young. Were you older, your love would be of a calmer and more reasonable nature. If you keep on drinking, you will do some fool trick in the way of injuring yourself."

A bitter smile crossed Evan Rodman's face.

"I shall not drink after to-night."

"Do you mean it?"

"I do, for I will be dead to-morrow! I have written a farewell letter to Nadine, and this little tool will put an end to my love and my folly."

Like a flash, he snatched out a revolver, cocked it and clapped the muzzle to his temple. The determination to commit suicide was expressed on his face. In another moment he would have been a dead man.

"Stop!"

Old Deadsure was looking Evan squarely in the eye when the word broke from his lips.

"Don't shoot!"

The would-be suicide sat like a stone, prevented from accomplishing his desperate purpose by the superior will of the man across the table.

"Lower that revolver."

Evan obeyed.

"If you want to die so much, let me do the shooting. Take that weapon by the barrel and pass it to me butt first."

Without a remonstrance, the young man did as directed.

"Are you really desirous of sending a bullet into your head?" calmly asked Manton.

"Yes."

"Take that!"

Old Burke flung up the hand that held the revolver, pulling trigger as he did so. The muzzle of the weapon was so near Evan Rodman's forehead that it almost seemed as if the flame and powder scorched the flesh.

CHAPTER IX.

THE WILD GIRL AGAIN.

EVAN RODMAN sat with his back to the door of the room, which the detective was nearly facing. A slight noise beyond this door had attracted the attention of the latter, and, for the first time he observed that the fanlight was open.

Watching closely without appearing to do so, Manton saw a bearded face rise cautiously and slowly into view, and a pair of blood-shot eyes peered through the transom into the room. The rogue-catcher recognized the unprepossessing head of Biff Jones, the thug.

The spy of the Clan Gang had found the escaped man-hunter!

Without giving Jones cause to suspect he had been detected, Manton obtained possession of Evan Rodman's cocked revolver. His talk with the young man was a blind to cover his movements. All at once he cried: "Take that!"

Then Old Burke flung up the revolver and took a snap shot at the ugly mug beyond the fanlight.

He did not waste the bullet.

There was a cry of pain and a thud beyond the door. The smoke lifted and showed Biff Jones's face had vanished.

"I have punctured a spy," declared Deadsure, springing up. "I'll know him anywhere after this, for he has a bullet hole through his right ear."

He leaped to the door and tore it open, but Biff Jones was not there. The thug had lost no time in taking to his heels, and he was heard leaping down the stairs, taking five at a time.

"I'd like to clip his other ear," muttered Manton, as he ran out, revolver in hand.

But when he reached the stairs, the spy was gone. He came back deliberately, speaking a word of assurance to the frightened guests who had opened their doors to inquire about the excitement.

Evan was standing at the door of the room looking down in a dazed manner at a splotch of blood on the floor of the corridor.

"That shows I did not waste the lead," said Old Deadsure, triumphantly. "That fellow will get tired of fooling around me after awhile."

"Who was it?" asked the young man.

"An enemy. He was looking into the room through the fanlight."

Evan passed his hand over his eyes.

"The flash blinded me," he said. "I fancied for a moment you had fired square into my face."

"And saved you the trouble of committing suicide. Come back, my boy, and we will talk that over some more. There is no danger of being troubled by Biff Jones again this night."

They returned to the table and sat down, but Evan had very little to say. The power of speech seemed to be gone from him as if the pistol-shot had sobered him. He no longer spoke wildly of suicide, and Manton fancied there was a flush of shame in his cheeks.

The detective talked earnestly to Evan, giving him not a little good advice. He ended by saying:

"I will keep this revolver to-night my lad; you can have it the next time we meet. Just think this matter over and see if you are not foolish. Ten chances to one, this infatuation for your beautiful cousin will wear off and you will be glad she did not take you seriously. If not that, then you may find she does really love you. You can't tell anything about a girl by her whims, Rodman. When they love most, they sometimes pretend to hate. They are the most contrary creatures on the face of the earth, and no man ever sounded the uttermost depths of a woman's soul."

Evan said nothing at all until the detective made him promise not to attempt his like again that night. The promise was given, and then they left the room and descended the stairs.

"We'll not go out by the front door," said Manton. "Come with me."

They passed out the back way and were soon on the street again. The hour was late. Passing O'Neil's restaurant at the corner of Sixth avenue and Twenty-third street, they glanced in casually.

"Hello," said Manton. "Notice that black mustached dandy sitting at the table by the central pillar. That is Elegant Ell, one of the slickest crooks in New York."

Evan gave a low exclamation of surprise.

"See!" he cried, catching Old Burke by the arm. "That man with him—the brown-bearded one!"

"Yes."

"See how they are chatting together!"

"Yes. What of it?"

"What of it! Great heavens! This confirms my suspicion that he was not all straight. If he is honorable, he would not

be in O'Neil's at this hour of the morning chatting across a lunch-table with a well-known crook."

"You know him? Who is he?"

"The mysterious Mr. Smith!"

"Your cousin's acquaintance?"

"Yes."

Old Deadsure coughed behind one gloved hand.

"Mr. Smith has chosen singular company.

It is true the police have never been able to fasten any definite crime on Ellerton Dorne, but they know he has been behind many crooked games. Why, I have even heard it said he is often called 'the Prince of Crooks,' and glories in the title."

Evan was greatly excited.

"And to think Nadine should have anything to do with a man who chooses such company!" he cried. "It is horrible! She cannot know what a creature this Smith is!"

Manton had taken a sudden interest in the mysterious Smith, for a singular fancy that this man might in some way be connected with the society robberies had taken possession of him. He did not immediately understand how this could be possible unless Smith had the swing of swell receptions and balls, but there was much mystery about the whole matter, and he was not the man to overlook any thread that might lead to the unravelling of the tangle.

Lightly touching his companion's arm, he said:

"Come."

"No," retorted Evan. "I am going to remain and watch those rascals. They are a precious pair!"

"Don't be foolish," advised the rogue-catcher. "The lights are brilliant upon us here, and they would see us and take the alarm if they glanced up. Come further on. We can watch the doors quite as well. They will not get away."

Evan saw this was wisdom, and allowed himself to be drawn on a short distance. Halting in a slight shadow, they waited for Elegant Ell and Mr. Smith to finish their lunch and come forth. Thirty minutes passed, and then the pair came out upon the street.

Barely had they left the restaurant when a dark figure darted toward them from the shadows of the Elevated Railroad. It was a female, and she confronted Smith in the full blaze of the lights before the saloon, shaking her hands in his face and shrieking:

"I am not dead! I can't be killed!"

The man fell back in consternation, turning pale.

Old Deadsure recognized the wild creature as the girl who had so alarmed Nadine Van Dyke in the Fifth Avenue Theater.

"No, no!" she shouted; "I'll not die so easy! I will live to see you behind iron bars!"

"Who is this?" asked Elegant Ell.

"Blessed if I know!" Smith answered.

"You lie, lie, lie!" shrieked the mad girl.

"You have my secret—you know who I am! I have forgotten, but you know the truth! Some time you will have to tell what you know!"

At this moment a policeman appeared.

"Officer," cried Smith, "arrest this mad woman."

But, with a burst of high-pitched laughter, the wanderer of the night took flight, dodged into the shadows of a side street and was gone.

CHAPTER X.

SAVED BY A DREAM.

In vain the policeman attempted to pursue her, for she seemed as fleet of foot as a deer. He came back puffing, to find the man who demanded her arrest was gone.

The mysterious Mr. Smith and his elegant companion had moved away as soon as the officer started after the wild girl.

Standing in the shadows, Manton and Evan watched them for a few seconds, and then sauntered along in pursuit.

The young man was inclined to speak excitedly, but Manton hushed him.

"Talk in a natural tone," he directed.

"Keep your eyes on those fellows, but do not seem to notice them. They may try to slip us in a side street."

This was not done, however, although the

crook and his companion turned to the east at Fifteenth street.

All at once Elegant Ell wheeled square about and came back, halting before Evan and the detective.

"Good evening," he said.

Old Burke seemed surprised.

"What can we do for you?" he asked.

"You can stop dogging us," was Ell's retort.

Smith sauntered back, puffing at a cigar.

"Dogging you?" questioned Manton.

"Exactly. You have followed us since we left O'Neil's. Do you deny it?"

"My dear sir," drawled the detective, "you give me extreme weariness. It must be you have been indulging in seltzer, or something equally befuddling."

Elegant Ell sneered.

"Are you trying to run a bluff on me?" he demanded. "If so, you have tackled the wrong chap, I know you, for all of your blonde mustache and wig."

"How is your friend's ear?" Manton suddenly asked.

"What's that?"

"A simple question. As you know so much, I presume you have seen Mr. Biff Jones since he did the monkey act beyond the fanlight."

"I don't know what you are driving at."

"Now, you are putting up a bluff. You say you know me. If that is true, you should know better than to think you can throw sand in my optics, Ell Dorne."

The Prince of Crooks was silent for a moment, looking keenly at the supposed detective. He knew Old Deadsure was a dangerous man to tamper with, and he felt he was treading on dangerous ground, but he showed not the least symptom of nervousness.

"You haven't got anything against me," he finally observed.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I am not fool enough to let you get anything."

"That sounds well, but the wisest men make breaks sometimes. You are spotted!"

The final words were spoken in a manner that would have made an ordinary rascal cringe and cower, but Elegant Ell simply showed his white teeth in a tigerish smile.

"Spotted!" he laughed. "I have been spotted a score of times, and what has it amounted to? I care nothing for your spotting, but I won't stand it to be dogged about the streets! There is no reason in the world why you should be following me?"

"You are wrong."

"How?"

"I wanted to hear your voice."

"For what?"

"To see if it sounded familiar since you removed that peculiar head-covering you were wearing earlier in the night."

For a twinkling, it seemed that this shot had struck home; but Ell was a consummate actor, and it was not more than a twitch of the lips that betrayed him. They were standing near a street lamp, but the crook immediately turned so his face was in the shadow.

"I don't know what you are driving at," he asserted; "and, what is more interesting, I don't care a hoot. But, I want to ask you now to refrain from dogging me any further."

"If I continue to follow you—what?"

"We will see."

He turned sharply away. As he did so, the smothered report of a revolver was heard, and Old Burke suddenly reeled backward, uttering a low exclamation and clutching at the air. Then he dropped to the stones, while the Prince of Crooks hurried along the street, Mr. Smith with him.

With an exclamation of dismay, Evan bent over the detective, crying:

"Are you shot?"

For a moment there was no reply, and then Manton said:

"I was struck by a bullet that took away my breath, but I believe my shield has saved me."

He sat up and tore open his coat, quickly discovering he was right. The bullet had been turned by the metal, and not a drop of blood was drawn!

"Who fired the shot?" asked Evan.

"That's what I want to know!" cried Deadsure, getting quickly upon his feet. "I saw no flash, and I know not if it came

from some hidden spot near at hand or Elegant Ell fired from his pocket. Where is the rascal?"

The Prince of Crooks and his companion had vanished.

"They must have entered one of these houses," declared the detective.

"They have slipped us."

"Yes; we'll not see them again this night."

"Too bad!"

"It's really of no consequence, so long as Ell had tumbled to the fact that he was being followed. We should have made nothing out of it with him on his guard. You can see how cute he is. All the same, I fancy I have a bit of knowledge that will bring him up with a round turn before long."

"It is the other man I cared the most for."

"Your Mr. Smith is in it very extensively. You can be of assistance to me, if you will."

"How?"

"By keeping a close watch on your cousin and telling me when she meets this man Smith. She may be in this man's power. Perhaps you may be instrumental in saving her. If she were not entangled by him, she might be free to love you."

This idea seemed to strike home. For a moment Evan was silent; then he grasped the detective's hand.

"I will do it!" he cried. "I believe you are right in saying she is possibly in his power. That explains all, even though I cannot understand how he could have obtained any influence over her."

"Even that will be made clear in time. Do your best, Rodman, and trust to fortune to bring everything out right in the end."

When they parted the detective no longer feared Evan Rodman would carry out his mad plan of suicide. The young man had been interested in his cousin's behalf, and he would work to free her of any entanglement in which she had become involved. He now had an object in life—something to occupy his attention and challenge his craft.

Manton hurried to his lodgings, intent on getting a few hours' sleep, as he was beginning to feel weary. He knew he would need to be fresh and vigorous for the battle before him.

He entered the room, locked the door, lighted the gas for a few moments, then turned it off and threw himself on the bed without undressing.

He was sleeping almost immediately.

In a short time, he began to dream. He thought his enemies had him foul once more and he was being slowly strangled to death. A cord was about his throat and strong hands were drawing it tighter and tighter. He fought and attempted to cry out. Madly he struggled for life, and suddenly he awoke.

He lay dazed for some seconds, gasping for breath. Then he realized the room was full of gas and it was indeed difficult to draw a breath. He leaped up and started for the window, but he was nearly overcome before he could reach it.

Quickly Manton flung up the sash, leaning out and drawing a deep breath of morning air. There were strange rumblings in his head and a terrible sickness at the pit of his stomach. With horror, he realized that a few moments more of sleep would have done for him. He had escaped death by a hair's breadth, actually saved by a dream!

For some time he leaned out of the window, listening to the rumbling of heavy carts on the street, for the city was commencing to awaken, even though the first streak of dawn had not yet begun to appear in the east.

Manton thoroughly aired the room, and then he lighted a match and sought for the leak. To his astonishment, he found the gas-jet was wide open!

"Great Scott!" he gasped, as he promptly shut off the flow. "Is there hayseed in my hair? Did I blow out the gas? It can't be!"

And still, he could see no other explanation of the affair.

After the gas was quite out of the room, he closed the window and threw himself on the bed again. Sleep did not come to his eyes as readily as before, for he could not

help thinking he had turned off the gas when he extinguished it, and, this being the case, how had it come to be turned on fully?

As he lay there, thinking the matter over, a slight scratching noise attracted his notice. It came from the wall close by the gas-fixture.

In a moment, Old Deadsure scented deviltry, and he was very wide awake.

In less than a minute he smelled gas again!

Up he leaped, struck a match, and looked at the stop-cock of the gas-fixture.

It was turned, and the gas was flowing into the room under full head!

"What devil's work is this?" cried Deadsure, as he again shut it off. "There is something crooked here!"

In a moment he decided to light the gas and investigate. Striking another match, he turned on the gas and set about examining the fixture, his heart hot with rage, for he believed a dastardly attempt to murder him had been made.

In a few seconds, he discovered a small hole in the wall near the brass arm of the gas-fixture. There he saw a crooked bit of wire that had been drawn back to the curve. He caught hold of it and gave a strong, sharp jerk. Two feet of wire was drawn into the room!

Then Manton instantly comprehended the whole dastardly trick. The crook at the end of the wire served to get hold of the stop-cock and turn it, while the wire was manipulated by some person beyond the wall.

With a shout of fury, Deadsure tore open the door of his room and sprung to that of the next, on which he beat a tattoo with his knuckles.

"Open this door!" he thundered. "Open, or I will break it down!"

There was a moment of silence, and then—

Crack! crack! Two bullets came zipping through the panels of the door, narrowly missing the detective's head!

That was enough for Old Burke.

Retreating three steps, he hurled himself against the door.

Down it went, with a terrible crash, and he bounded into the room, expecting to be greeted by bullets.

He looked about.

The room was empty!

This was explained by the wide-open window. Springing forward, he looked out.

At the foot of the fire-escape, which ran close by the window, he saw a dark figure. A taunting laugh came up to his ears, and the figure darted into the darkness of a narrow passage between two buildings.

Manton knew pursuit was useless. The would-be assassin had escaped.

CHAPTER XI.

BUCKSKIN DICK BREAKS HIS WORD.

THE house was aroused, and Manton was forced to explain the cause of the commotion. When she heard his story, the good woman who conducted the house was filled with horror. She had let the room next to Burke's only the day before to a fine-appearing gentleman who had paid a week in advance, and she could scarcely believe a deliberate attempt had been made on Manton's life.

Deadsure was the coolest person in the house. He took the matter very calmly and talked very little, much to the disappointment of the others. He soon returned to the room again, instructing one of the aroused servants to call him at nine o'clock. With the hum of voices coming from beyond his door, he lay down and fell asleep.

It was two o'clock the following afternoon when Manton met Buckskin Dick on Fifth avenue. The man from the West knew the detective instantly, as the latter was not wearing a disguise.

"The very galoot I want to see!" cried Dick, in his free and easy manner. "I have found him!"

"Who?"

"Lucky Luke."

"In New York?"

"Yes. I came face to face with him last night—or, rather, this morning. I grasped him by the collar and demanded my wife. He turned pale and trembled, like the dog he is."

The Westerner was excited; his face was flushed and there was a glitter in his eyes.

Old Deadsure was interested.

"He denied knowing anything about Lucy," Dick continued. "He even swore he was not Lucky Luke, the gambler. I drew a knife on him, and as there is a heaven above us, I would have cut him then and there had I not been struck down from behind. He must have had a pard near, as I was knocked senseless and lay thus in the street for a long time. When I recovered, he was gone."

"Easy," cautioned the detective. "You are drawing the attention of the passing throng. There is no reason why you should blow your affairs to the mob."

Buckskin Dick instantly became cool.

"You are right," he confessed. "I was once called a man of nerve, but I fear I am losing my reputation. My blood gets so hot I can't hold myself in check, pard. That devil escaped me last night, but I'll hound him up before long. The trail is getting mighty hot."

"Evidently you are right."

"Say, I have been thinking about that girl who fainted in front of the theater. I can't get it out of my head that she is my wife, or, at least, Lucy's twin sister. It can't be otherwise. Do you know if she ever had a sister?"

"I think she is old Jasper Van Dyke's only child."

"Look here, pard, can't you take me where I can see her and hear her talk?"

"Impossible!"

"Now, don't say that! Don't you have the run of the Van Dyke ranch?"

"Yes; but—"

"Then you can take me there."

"It would never do."

"Why not?"

Manton looked Dick over.

"Do you think that is just the kind of a rig to wear in the parlor of a Fifth avenue mansion?" he smiled.

Buckskin Dick was astounded for the moment, and then he said:

"Off it comes, if that's the trouble. It's only a freak of mine to wear it here in New York anyway. You know I'm an independent cuss—don't care a hoot for anybody. What ought I to wear, pard?"

"A black afternoon suit."

"Just head me for the place where I can get it, and I'll be with you directly. I want to go there and see this yere girl in her own home—I want to hear her talk and watch the play of her face. That'll convince me if I'm wrong. If I'm right—"

"What?"

"Well, I won't hurt her—I couldn't hurt her, pard! She's too much a like child, even if she proves to be a wicked woman. But I must know the truth—I must know if she's really my lost Lucy."

Old Deadsure suddenly decided to take Buckskin Dick along with him. Twenty-four hours before, he would not have dreamed of such a thing; but certain occurrences had filled him with doubt and uncertainty, and he was really desirous of knowing if there was any possible truth in the Westerner's claim.

It was only a short distance to a Sixth avenue clothing store, and within half an hour, the man from Colorado was dressed conventionally enough to pass without attracting attention.

"Well, I do feel queer in this rig!" he exclaimed. "It's been a right smart bit of a while since I have been togged out after this style."

From the store they went direct to Jasper Van Dyke's home. Manton expected to meet Nadine, as he had an appointment with her for that afternoon.

They were admitted to the parlor, and the detective sent up his card.

"Here," he said, speaking to Buckskin Dick, "you step in here behind these curtains. It is dark here, and you can see without being seen. You will hear every word that passes, but I warn you to remain silent. I have brought you here at your own request, and I depend on your good judgment."

The Westerner hesitated an instant and then he stepped behind the curtains, where he was quite concealed from view.

In a few minutes, Nadine appeared. She

was charmingly gowned and appeared like a budding maiden fresh from school.

"Oh, have you learned anything about my necklace?" she exclaimed, her manner being free and natural, with none of the icy reserve of the modern New York girl. "I have worried so much about it, I fear it is lost beyond recovery. You haven't learned anything about it?"

"I am sorry to say I have not," acknowledged Manton; "but I fancy I have struck a trail that may lead to something."

"I'm so glad! I hope you will catch the horrid thief! I think he's just as mean as he can be! And to think he may be one of the young men with whom I am on friendly terms! It is terrible!"

It struck Manton that she was just a little more girlish in her words and actions than usual.

"Tell me all about it," she went on, entreatingly. "I am so interested!"

He was standing by the center table; she came close and sat on the arm of an easy-chair. The posture was one of grace and ease, and she leaned toward him, lifting her innocent brown eyes to his. He was ready to swear this was pure artlessness.

"That would hardly be policy," smiled the detective. "I never talk over my plans or reveal what I have learned until the proper moment arrives."

She drew back, her red lips pouting.

"How mean!" she exclaimed. "I should think you might let me know of your progress, as it is my necklace you are seeking to recover."

"That is all the more reason why I should not tell you so much. You are deeply interested, and you would be sure to speak of the matter to some intimate friend. That might ruin everything."

"I promise—"

He smiled.

"And I have not a doubt but you would mean to faithfully keep your promise. But one makes slips of the tongue sometimes."

She began to impatiently pull the petals from a pink rose on her bosom, allowing them to flutter one by one to the floor.

"I don't know why it is," she murmured, "but every one seems to doubt my judgment. They appear to think a girl cannot keep a secret. I am not like other girls."

He thought she spoke the truth. There was something mysterious about her—something he could not fathom. She was in appearance and actions a fair, fresh young girl, but he felt that she might be wise beyond her years.

"I know you will pardon me for not breaking my rule this time," he said.

Again she flashed an entreating look into his eyes, lifting a flower-like face in which there was nothing but maidenly frankness. Had he been a younger man, Manton Burke might have felt like being indiscreet just then; as it was, his blood quickened in his veins. Nadine was all warmth and freedom, while he was accustomed to imagine society girls as polished and chilly to the extreme.

Behind the heavy curtains a man was listening with his heart hushed and his breathing still, and with each passing moment his self-control was slipping from him.

"I met a gentleman last evening who fancied he knew you in the West," observed Manton, with apparent carelessness.

Nadine did not start, but she showed mild surprise.

"In the West!" she echoed. "He must have been mistaken."

"He was certain he knew you at first. We saw you as you came out of the Fifth Avenue Theater with your father."

The girl flushed, as if an unpleasant memory had been aroused.

"Wasn't it terrible!" she exclaimed. "I was so frightened I swooned. That girl must have been crazy."

There was a sudden rustling of the portieres—they parted—a man stepped out.

"Lucy!" cried Buckskin Dick, his hands extended to her.

fell back, staring at him in apparent wonderment.

Manton had been a little startled by Buckskin Dick's sudden appearance, but he now watched the scene with breathless interest. His sharp eyes scrutinized Nadine Van Dyke's face for a sign of consternation or guilt, but he saw nothing of the kind. She retreated swiftly from the Westerner, a touch of hauteur in her manner.

"I beg your pardon!" and her eyebrows were lifted daintily. "I did not know there was a third party present."

Something like a gasping sigh escaped from the lips of the man by the portieres.

"Is this the way you meet me?" he asked, huskily. "I might have known, and yet—and yet—" He bowed his head, his hands clinched.

Astonishment deepened in Nadine Van Dyke's brown eyes. She looked from Buckskin Dick to the detective.

"Who is this man?" she asked, abruptly. "Is he deranged?"

Manton opened his lips, but before he could speak, the man from Colorado took three steps forward and halted squarely facing old Jasper Van Dyke's daughter.

"I am not deceived," he soberly declared, speaking with forced calmness. "Had I entertained a doubt concerning you, you would not have known of my presence in this room. I remained hidden as long as I could."

Nadine compressed her lips and flashed a cutting glance at Old Burke.

"Did you bring this man here—an eaves-dropper?" she asked, with biting scorn. "Is this the act of an honorable—"

"Stop!" cried Buckskin Dick. "He did not bring me here. I came of my own accord. I asked him to bring me, and he refused."

Although he dissembled, he also spoke the truth. However, he had broken his word to Manton, and he was ready to shield the detective at any cost.

"Then you are not responsible for his presence?" questioned the girl, still directing her words to Manton.

"He is not," the Westerner assured. "But you must listen to me, now that I have found you and we stand face to face. I have a few words to say, and I demand that you hear them."

She lifted her beautiful head proudly.

"You have no right to demand anything of me!" she flashed. "I do not know you. Why, I never in all my life looked on your face before!"

That came near staggering Buckskin Dick. For a bit, he was silenced, but he quickly recovered.

"You are a consummate actress," was his deliberate assertion. "And to think I once fancied you the fair and innocent young girl you seem! You deceived me."

She turned to Dedsure.

"The man is mad!" she declared.

"You know better than that, Lucy," said Dick. "You have been able to exalt yourself to a high position in some unaccountable way, but you are still my wife."

"I will not talk with a raving lunatic!" she exclaimed, wheeling as if to leave the room.

He did not try to intercept her, but he said:

"If you leave me like this, I will fill tomorrow's newspapers with a story that will shake New York society to the very center—a story in which you will be greatly interested."

It seemed that she paled the least bit. Anyway, she turned back swiftly, saying:

"You are evidently a blackmailer."

"You know better."

"I can not think differently. I know very little about such rascals, although I have been told of them. From what I have heard, I should say that is your business."

"If I were a blackmailer, I would be after money. I do not want a cent, for I have more of my own than I can easily use. All I ask is that you will listen to me a few moments. If I am a crazy person, as you claim, you can have no fear of me while Manton Burke is present, for he would certainly protect you should I offer to do you harm."

"He cannot protect me from your insinuating words."

"I shall not insult you, Lucy. You are my wife in name only, for you deserted me—fled with that miserable dog who tried to end my life!"

"What do you call such an accusation but an insult? Again I say you are deranged! I will call the servants and have you ejected!"

"Do so—if you dare!"

She was pale and trembling with anger, but it was plain she did not wish to carry out her threat. Manton did not wonder at this so very much, for he could understand how she shrunk from having her name involved in any scandalous story the sensational and unscrupulous newspapers would be only too glad to publish. If such a story appeared, even though it were not true, even though a suit followed, even though it were proven false, it must bring unwelcome notoriety upon her.

In truth, the detective's sympathy was with the fair young girl, for her situation seemed most trying and her distress was plainly unassumed. But the detective had long ago hardened his heart to sentiment where business was concerned. He wished to settle definitely in his own mind whether Nadine was the pure and innocent young girl she seemed or was a skilled and crafty adventuress. He was not ready to believe she could be the latter, but he had seen so many wonderful things in the course of his adventurous career that it took a great deal to surprise him.

Nadine turned back, with a sigh of despair.

"I suppose it will be sensible for me to hear what you have to say," came coldly from her lips. "I implore you to be as brief as possible—and then go!"

The man from Colorado bowed.

"Some men would hold a bitter hatred for a woman who had deserted them in such a way," he said; "but I have only pity for you. It is that devil who lured you away that I want to get at! He shall pay the penalty!"

She shivered a little and looked at Manton appealingly. The detective was deeply interested in the scene. He made no move.

"I met him last night," Buckskin Dick went on. "I had my hand at his throat, and I would have forced the truth from his lips had not a pard of his struck me down from behind. Why they did not finish the job and leave me dead in the street, I cannot imagine. You should have seen him pale and tremble when he heard my voice and saw my face. He may have thought me a ghost. Perhaps that is why he did not try to kill me when I lay senseless before him. He tried once and failed."

He ceased speaking, and there was silence in the room. The girl made no move. She had apparently resigned herself to the unpleasant but inevitable.

"As long as you remain single," the Westerner continued, "I will not molest you. But the moment you attempt to deceive some good man into a marriage, I shall warn him—tell him the truth—reveal your past record."

This seemed to stir her somewhat.

"My dear man," she said, "it is possible, if you are not really a blackmailer, that you are laboring under a delusion. If so, I am sorry for you. I assure you, I do not know you. I never saw you. As for being your wife, such a thing is simply preposterous. I am not yet twenty-one years of age, and I never dreamed of marrying anybody."

She seemed in earnest, and it was not an easy thing to imagine she spoke anything but the simple truth. Her manner was natural and impressive.

A hard look settled on the face of the man from the West.

"You can't deceive me, Lucy," he harshly asserted. "I am not to be bluffed in such a manner. You have heard my warning, and I trust you will have sense enough to heed it."

"I see it is useless to talk with you!" and she made a gesture of despair. "I don't know much about law, but, as true as there is any law in New York, I will have you arrested if you trouble and harass me! I am in earnest, sir!"

Buckskin Dick smiled, but it was a bitter smile.

"I see you are determined to face it

CHAPTER XII.

NADINE'S DENIAL.

THE man trembled with excitement and his eyes gleamed with the passion of hopeless love.

With an exclamation of surprise, the girl

out. Very well. I shall know just how to deal with you in the future."

"We will have no dealings with each other in the future."

"Ah, but we will!"

"Never! I scarcely understand why I have tolerated your words and your presence, but a feeling of dread caused me to do so. I now imagine I have been foolish. If you have said all you desire, will you kindly go?"

She pointed toward the door.

For a moment the Westerner hesitated, and then he bowed quietly.

"I will go. There is no reason why I should stay here longer. But do not for one instant think I am going very far. I have found you, I have yet to settle the score with Lucky Luke."

His hand in, he retreated to the door, bowed low and disappeared.

When he was gone, Nadine sunk, pale and trembling, into a chair.

"It must be he is a madman!" she gasped. "I wonder at my own nerve! Oh, how terrible it all was!"

She seemed ready to swoon. Manton hastened to her side, asking if he should ring for water.

"No, no; I will be all right directly. I wonder how he got in here? I beg a thousand pardons for dreaming you brought him here."

Old Burke said nothing.

After a few moments, she regained her strength and the warm color crept back to her cheeks.

"Go quickly!" she cried, starting from the chair. "Follow that man and find out all about him! He must be watched! If he is crazy, see that he is taken care of before he does harm! Go, I entreat you!"

He felt that it was best to make his departure at once, so he bade her good-day, promising to look after Buckskin Dick, and was quickly on the street.

Seeing nothing of the Westerner, he struck down the avenue. In a few moments, he was joined by Dick.

"She is astounding—she is wonderful!" cried the man from Colorado. "I never dreamed she could act in such a manner! Oh, but I beg forgiveness for appearing as I did! I did not mean to, but I was out there before I knew it."

"By appearing, you settled one point in my mind. That girl never saw you before in her life."

"That girl is my wife as sure as there is a sky above us!" solemnly asserted Buckskin Dick.

CHAPTER XIII.

SMITH TURNS THE TABLES.

It was the last ball of the season at Wolford's. The mansion was blazing with light and gay with decorations. The place was crowded, and everybody seemed in the best of spirits. Another week would see society take its flight from the city.

Evan Rodman, correct and immaculate, pushed his way through the throng of beautiful women. Every one seemed to know him and all greeted him pleasantly. No matter how he felt at heart, his face wore a smile.

He was looking for Nadine. She had arrived a little before, but he had lost her in the crush. Pretty women sought to engage him with their bright talk, but he made his excuses and continued to wander about. On every side was a perfect sea of ivory shoulders and snowy necks.

The society gentleman was there, of course, but he seemed rather inconspicuous in the midst of such feminine loveliness. The fop and the anglo-maniac made themselves noticeable by their affected manners.

Suddenly, Evan came face to face with Wilma Wilcox. Both started and paled. She dropped her eyes and passed on.

"By Jove!" thought the young man; "she is lovely to-night!"

He was right. Wilma was certainly a beautiful girl. Her eyes were dark as night and her complexion as fair as the tint of a wax rose. But health and life were in her lips and her cheeks, and she needed no cosmetics nor rouge. Her form was a model of perfection.

He turned to look after her.

"I may have been a fool," he muttered.

"By her own efforts she has won a place in cultured circles, for she is not rich, but she is both beautiful and brilliant. Well, a man must live out his destiny."

He went on again. The sensuous strains of a waltz came from the ball room, but he had no taste for dancing. However, he fancied he might find Nadine there.

He was not disappointed in his. She was dancing. He caught a glimpse of her amid the whirling figures on the polished floor, and he wondered who her partner could be.

He was Dare, Old Burke's clever society spy.

Evan resolved to speak with Nadine the moment the dancing was over; but he was prevented by an unexpected event. The hostess brought forward Wilma Wilcox and introduced the two young ladies.

"What is the meaning of that?" thought Evan. "Who sought the acquaintance, and why?"

He was left to his conjectures while the young ladies were chatting together.

Finally, a gentleman approached them. Evan gave a start of amazement.

"Is it possible?" he muttered, staring hard at the man. "Great Scott! It is—Mr. Smith!"

The mysterious man spoke to Nadine and was presented to Wilma. For some moments he chatted with them, while Evan Rodman fretted and fumed. Evan would have presented himself but for Wilma's presence.

Happening to turn away for a moment, he was astonished to discover when he looked back that Smith and Nadine had vanished. Wilma was strolling away, leaning on the arm of an acquaintance.

A strange feeling came over Evan.

"There is something crooked going on," he thought. "I am sure of it, but I don't know why I think so."

He hastened to look for Smith and Nadine, but he saw nothing of either for some time. Then he came upon the man, who was chatting with a sallow-faced but wealthy young lady.

"So that rascal knows Ruth Sargent," muttered Evan. "I wonder if Nadine introduced them?"

He stood for some moments where he could observe the couple, and he saw Smith was exceedingly attentive. The strange man had an easy way and polished bearing, and his attentions evidently pleased and flattered the Sargent girl, who was something of a wall-flower.

Smith spoke softly to the girl, his lips close to her cheek and his eyes fastened upon her with a gaze that seemed filled with admiration. After a time, they arose and strolled out into the conservatory, where they vanished amid the plants and flowers.

Again Evan sought for Nadine. In time, he found her, but she tried to avoid him. He was not to be baffled that way, however.

"Nadine," he said, softly, "I have been seeking for you."

"Have you, cousin mine?" she smiled.

"Well, you have found me."

"And I have found you looking sweeter and more ravishing than ever before! Great Heaven! Nadine, you are enough to bring life to a man of stone! You are simply marvelous, superb, divine!"

"That will do, Evan!" she retorted. "You are very handy at turning a compliment, but—"

"I never was more in earnest in all my life! Darling," he passionately whispered, "you are driving me mad! I love you so I never cease to think of you for one moment!"

"Not even when you are sleeping?"

"Don't jest! Not even when I am sleeping—I dream of you then. You cannot know what I have sacrificed for you! But that is nothing, nothing! I am ready to give up the world to win you!"

In his passionate eagerness, he was forgetting his surroundings, but she called him to himself.

"Remember where you are, Mr. Rodman. This is no place for love-making, and I have forbidden you to speak of these things to me."

"No place!" he desperately murmured. "I can find no other opportunity! You rebuff me everywhere; you will not even see me when you are alone. My love—"

She tapped his lips with her fan.

"Hush! I am truly sorry, Evan, if I have aroused so much love in your heart, for I can never be anything to you—that is, more than I am now. I know you are one of the noblest fellows in the world, but—"

"I am not a noble fellow. I know my own weak points, but I am so sincere in this! I am ready to do anything to win. By Heaven! if that man has come between us, it shall be the worse for him!"

"What man?"

"Smith."

She fell back a bit. He caught her hand, looking deep into her eyes.

"You love him!"

"I hate him!"

The reply was unexpected. Then the mysterious Mr. Smith was not his rival. If this were true, the man must have some hold on her, as he had surmised. Otherwise, she would have nothing to do with him.

"Then why do you tolerate him? If you fear this man, say so. I will soon dispose of his case."

She glanced around, frightened.

"No, no! You can do nothing! You do not know him! He is—"

She stopped abruptly.

"Trust me," urged Evan. "I will prove your best friend."

"I cannot! I cannot!"

Her distress was genuine. He longed to clasp her in his arms and entreat her to give him her utmost confidence. He did urge her once again to trust him fully and freely.

Out of the conservatory came Smith and Miss Sargent. The girl was actually blushing, while the man was gallantry itself. They came straight toward Nadine and Evan.

"There he is!" grated the young man. "I'll—"

"You will do nothing at all," said the girl, firmly. "If you love me as you say you do, you will not compromise me here."

He saw she was right, and he stood biting his lip, his hands clinched.

He scarcely knew how it came about, but, in a very few moments, Ruth Sargent was chatting to him, while Smith bore Nadine away on his arm. Evan's mouth was dry and his heart hot. He could say very little.

Thirty minutes later, wandering alone in the conservatory to get a breath of air, he heard low and excited voices. He paused, and these words came to his ears:

"You must do as I say! You know what will happen if you refuse."

The voice was Smith's!

"I know, miserable wretch!" answered Nadine Van Dyke. "You are bound to drag me down! Exposure must—"

"Careful; you are speaking a trifle loudly. Some one might hear you."

Nadine's voice sunk to a murmur. Evan heard her pleading with the man, and then he was sure she fell to weeping. How his blood boiled! He was on the point of springing forward and revealing himself, when the girl burst into a passionate denunciation of her companion. Her words were so swift and broken, he only caught a few of them.

"Come," Nadine finished, "I will not remain here longer with you! Take me back to the reception-room."

Evan drew deep into the shadows and they passed him. He longed to strike forth and smite Smith down, but repressed the impulse for the time.

A few minutes later, there was a commotion in the ball-room, Ruth Sargent had discovered some of her diamonds were missing. The society thief was at work!

"He is here in this house!" exclaimed one of the young men gathered about Miss Sargent.

"You are right!" cried Evan Rodman, stepping quickly forward. "He is here, and there he stands!"

He pointed straight at the mysterious Mr. Smith!

Dare, the society spy, uttered an exclamation of dismay, for he had spotted the accused, though he had no intention of publicly denouncing him. Evan's act had ruined the young ferret's carefully laid plans.

Great excitement followed. Women fainted and men pressed forward.

Smith turned slowly and with dignity, looking Evan over carefully. At that moment, Nadine caught the young man's arm, trying to draw him away, whispering excitedly:

"Oh, Evan, Evan! how could you!"

"Be calm, dear," he retorted, beneath his breath. "I know him for what he is, and I mean to end his career in New York society this night."

She clung to him and seemed to repress her tears with difficulty.

For a bit, Mr. Smith was silent. Every eye was on him, and he knew it.

"The charge is false," he calmly asserted. "But I know the thief! *He is Evan Rodman!*"

This was a boomerang.

"No, no!" cried many voices. They knew Evan too well to believe such a thing.

"Search him!" cried Evan, still confronting Smith. "Search him! You will find the missing jewels!"

"I am ready to be searched if you will consent to be searched at the same time," said Smith.

"Done!"

They walked from the room. Two private detectives were on hand, and both men were escorted to a chamber, where they submitted to a careful search. Several society gentlemen watched the process.

There was a strange look of triumph on the face of the mysterious Smith. He seemed perfectly at his ease. The diamonds were not found upon him.

All at once, a cry escaped the lips of the man who was examining Evan Rodman's clothes.

"Here they are!" he exclaimed.

The missing diamonds were found! And they had been discovered in one of the young man's pockets!

Every one but Smith seemed dazed. Evan Rodman's face was like that of a corpse. For some seconds, he could not speak, but he finally cried:

"It is a dastardly trick! I am the victim of a foul plot!"

Smith laughed, sneeringly.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SOCIETY SCANDAL.

GREAT was the amazement created when the result of the search was made known. Evan Rodman had been regarded as an upright and honorable young man, and not a few declined to believe he could be the thief.

Nadine was waiting for him, and she seemed utterly prostrated by the revelation that the diamonds had been found in his possession.

"He never stole them!" she declared. "He is innocent!"

She made her way to the room and met him when he came forth, escorted by the officers. In a moment, her arms were about his neck, while she sobbed:

"Tell me it isn't true, Evan! Oh, it cannot be! I will not believe it!"

In the background stood another girl whose face was white as marble and whose eyes were tearless, although agony was expressed in their dark depths. Wilma Wilcox gave no expression to her feelings, but it seemed as if a crushing blow had been struck at her heart. Nothing could convince her of Evan's guilt.

"True!" echoed the unfortunate young man. "It is true the jewels were found on my person, but as there is a God, I know not how they came there!"

"I believe you—I believe you, Evan!" whispered Nadine. "Nothing can make me doubt you! Oh, dear cousin, there must be some explanation!"

"It is all a trick—a dastardly plot! And that man is at the bottom of it!"

He pointed at the mysterious Mr. Smith, who scowled and retorted:

"You are playing a desperate bluff, my lad, but it does not go." Then he added, speaking to Nadine: "I am sorry for you, Miss Van Dyke—sorry your cousin should turn out so bad. You have my sympathy."

She shrunk from him and clung closer to Evan.

"I do not want your sympathy, sir!" came somewhat hoarsely from her lips. "What I do want is justice—justice for my cousin!"

He is no more guilty of this terrible thing than I am!" Her eyes flashed; she drew herself up to her full height. "Is there one person here who dares face me and say he or she believes Evan Rodman a thief?" she cried.

No one spoke. It was a powerful situation. Never in all her life had the girl looked more beautiful than then, and murmurs of admiration came from many masculine lips.

Jasper Van Dyke came hurrying forward. He had just arrived, and the story of the affair had been hastily told him.

"What's this?" exclaimed the old man, as he joined his daughter and his nephew. "Who dares accuse Evan of robbery? Show me the person!"

"The stolen diamonds were found upon his person," respectfully said one of the detectives.

The old man seemed staggered. He lifted his trembling hand to his white head.

"Impossible!" he faltered.

There was not a person present who did not pity him. The Van Dyke honor had been his greatest pride. It was said that one time when he was ruined through the dishonesty of a miserable partner, he worked like a dog to pay his creditors dollar for dollar. The debt was liquidated, and he secured such confidence that large sums were advanced him without security. With these he won another and still larger fortune, trusting no partner.

"Is this true?" he asked, turning slowly to Evan.

"All too true, dear uncle; but I did not steal them. You must believe me! Did I ever lie to you?"

"Never, my boy."

"I swear I knew nothing of those diamonds until they were discovered in my pocket. How they came there is a mystery to me!"

Jasper Van Dyke nodded slowly.

"Truth is still in your face, Evan," he said. "I believe you, though others may not."

"Thank Heaven!" murmured the young man. "There are at least two persons who have faith in me!"

As he uttered the words his eyes met those of Wilma Cox. The girl spoke no word, but he was instantly aware that a third person had utter confidence in his honor. But that knowledge brought him pain, rather than satisfaction, for he remembered how he had worked to break their engagement when there was no sufficient reason for such a course. He would have been relieved had he seen hatred and scorn expressed on the girl's handsome features.

Dare, the society spy, was keenly observant of everything that was passing. He had been astounded by the termination of the search, for he had spotted Smith as the thief. The little ferret was shrewd enough to believe there was an undercurrent that did not appear, but he could not quite comprehend how it came that the suspected man had so readily cleared himself, and thrown the disgrace and shame on his accuser.

At that moment Dare would have given much had Manton Burke been on hand, for he felt that Old Deadsure would have solved the mystery instantly.

He did not know Old Deadsure was witnessing everything that passed. He did not dream the bewhiskered officer who stood near Evan Rodman's right elbow was the great detective in one of his marvelous disguises.

Manton had anticipated that a robbery would be done at Wolford's that night, and he had taken the place of one of the private officers summoned to be present. The persuasion of his magnetic eye had caused the officer to remain behind, while Burke, disguised till he was the man's perfect double, took his place.

No one was more astounded than Manton when the diamonds were discovered on Evan. Had he been the one to find them, he would have kept it secret, instantly divining a plot, but it happened to be the other officer who searched the pocket in which the stones were hidden.

Old Burke did not for one instant think Evan capable of theft, but he was wise enough not to express an opinion. He was watching everything like a hawk, and what

ever his thoughts, his countenance remained impassive.

The diamonds were restored to Miss Sargent, who identified them as her own. However, she declined to make any complaint against Evan Rodman.

"It will not be necessary to take my nephew to a place of confinement," said Jasper Van Dyke, with dignity. "I give my pledge that he shall appear to answer any charge that may be made against him at any time."

He looked around to see if any one objected to this. Not a word was spoken. The mysterious Mr. Smith had vanished.

Dare, the spy, had also disappeared.

So Evan departed unhindered, and Nadine was leaning on his arm. Wilma Wilcox saw them vanish together.

"She has won his heart completely," thought Wilma. "She is very beautiful, and she must be good, for she defended him so bravely when he was accused. Well, I wish them happiness. My dream of love is over!"

This exciting incident ruined the ball at Wolford's, for it was interrupted and broken up. But, what was most deplorable, was the publicity and scandal that followed. The newspaper reporters knew a juicy item when they struck it, and the papers of the following day contained columns about the unmasking of the thief who had been looting society so long. Some of the papers called attention to the fact that they had all along asserted the robber was one high in social circles, whom no person would naturally suspect. One paper undertook to show that Evan Rodman was a worthless young rascal, a *roue* and a spendthrift. It was said he frequented the lowest resorts, being often seen carousing with the abandoned women who frequented Murdock's establishment on Sixth avenue. It ended by pronouncing it a disgrace to the city that he had not been promptly arrested and held in heavy bail.

Of course this cut to the quick. Evan might have been crushed but for the consolation and encouragement of Nadine's repeated declarations that nothing could make her think him guilty.

"My dear little girl!" he cried, as he caught her hands and kissed them; "I am happy, knowing you still have confidence in me. I will yet be able to prove my innocence. Until then, I will not presume to speak more to you of love; but when this terrible stain is removed from my name, you shall know how much I adore you."

Old Burke was summoned, and the young man implored the detective, to do something to exonerate him.

"Keep cool, my boy," advised the detective, quietly. "It will come out all right in the end."

"It is well enough for you to say 'keep cool,' but if you only knew the torture I endure you—"

"I do know; I can see it in your face. I assure you, the guilty party shall be brought to justice. More than that, I affirm that, even now, I know who he is and my trusted spy is shadowing him. His past record is being investigated, and in a short time, I fancy I will have a revelation for the public that will cause some of those astute newspapers to fire a few of their detective reporters. Only about one out of ten of those fellows know their business. The other nine are bluffs."

The detective succeeded in putting Evan in better spirits, and then he departed.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SCARLET WOMAN.

NEW YORK society and New York in general was to be treated to a much severer shock than the apparent revelation of the infamy of Evan Rodman.

Two days after the ball at Wolford's Nadine Van Dyke mysteriously disappeared.

Buckskin Dick seemed to be the last person who had seen her in the city. The Westerner caught a glimpse of her on Broadway, saw her enter a cab, which carried her away down-town.

From that moment all trace of her was lost.

She did not return home that night, and

great was the excitement caused by her absence. The police were notified, and the morning papers had a full account of the remarkable vanishing of old Jasper's daughter.

How the reporters would have delighted to get hold of Buckskin Dick's story! But the man from Colorado was silent as the grave as to his claim on Nadine. He told freely where and when he had seen her, but he had not noticed the driver of the cab in particular and did not think he could identify the man.

Jasper Van Dyke was like a maniac. He summoned Manton to him and implored the detective to discover what had become of Nadine.

"She is my joy—the pride of my old life!" he sobbed. "How could any one harm my beautiful little girl—how could they?"

"She may be unharmed," consoled the detective. "Don't take on, Mr. Van Dyke. We will soon discover what has happened. You say you have notified the police and requested them to look out for her?"

"Yes, yes!" nodded Jasper. "And a dozen reporters have heard the story."

"Well, the affair will be well advertised. Every one will be on the lookout for her. Do you imagine she could have gone away anywhere of her own free will?"

"No, no, no! She would have told me—she tells me everything."

"Where is your nephew?"

"Evan?"

"Yes."

"He went out of town yesterday and has not returned."

A queer look passed over Manton's face.

"Where did he go?"

"He did not say. But this can have nothing to do with Nadine, my little girl."

"I am not so sure of that."

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind what I mean just now. Answer all my questions. How did Evan appear yesterday?"

"Cast down—much cast down. He walked out and met some of his former friends. They cut him dead. He came back and walked his room for hours. His face was very sad and bitter. He made some wild talk."

"What kind of talk?"

"Well, he said he didn't have anything to live for—that his life was ruined."

Old Burke pressed his lips together.

"Did Nadine overhear him?"

"I think so. Anyway, I found them together after that. She had been weeping."

Manton instantly recognized a peculiar and alarming aspect of the case. Evan had been despondent, so despondent that he had thought his life ruined. When a young man gets into that way of thinking, he is pretty sure to contemplate suicide. Nadine had overheard him; they had been found together, and the girl was weeping.

Had they gone away together and committed suicide?

Evan was sure the girl was persecuted by the mysterious Smith, and she might have sought death in order to escape her tormentor. The thought of ending their lives together might have appealed to the romantic fancy of the young couple and resulted in a tragedy.

He did not speak his thoughts aloud. Old Jasper was already wringing his thin hands in despair, and there was no reason why his agony should be increased. The detective continued his questioning until it seemed that there was no longer any doubt but the young couple had departed together, everything having been planned beforehand.

Manton knew it was possible they had not sought suicide. Old Jasper objected to marriages of first cousins, and they might have gone away to be married in some remote spot. Possibly, they did not intend to return to New York.

"Young fools will do anything!" thought the detective. "Perhaps they were so blind they could not see this course would be sure to make it appear that Evan is guilty."

One of the newspapers, more prying than the others, discovered Evan had vanished, and the result was a column of speculations not at all complimentary to the cousins. As Burke had feared, the paper claimed this flight proved beyond the shadow of a doubt

that Evan was the one who had had been looting society so long. He had not dared remain to face it out, as several warrants for his arrest had already been drawn, and the complainants were simply waiting to be sure there was no error. It was claimed he had obtained wind of the great danger and had lost no time in getting away. Then the paper went on to narrate how Nadine had defended him at Wolford's and of the evident attachment between the cousins. It ended by asserting they were married beyond a doubt.

This particular paper was kept from the hands of Jasper Van Dyke, his physician stating the man had once suffered from brain trouble and that he might become deranged if he read the article.

Up to date, nothing of a similar nature had ever so aroused New York's best people. Every paper was eagerly read and every citizen considered himself a private detective. People asked one another if there was anything new about the Van Dyke affair, and the newspaper offices were surrounded by a throng eager for the appearance of each issue.

Buckskin Dick sprung into sudden notoriety, as he was the person who had last seen Nadine. Everybody was asking who he could be and how it happened he knew the girl. Reporters set out to solve the mystery, but they might as well have attacked a Sphinx.

Between twelve and one o'clock of the night following this day, the Westerner was making his way along one of the disreputable East Side streets when he was suddenly struck on the head with a sandbag.

An instant later, Dick lay unconscious on the stones of the street.

Four dark figures bent over him.

"Lively, lads!" commanded one, speaking in a low tone. "Get him under cover at once."

They lifted him and carried him beneath a dark shed. There they found a door swung open for them, and the unconscious man was borne along the blackness of a narrow passage.

Some steps were reached, and there one of the men ventured to open the slide of a dark lantern. Then Dick was taken down the steps, which were beneath a trap-door in the floor of the old building, which was a deserted East Side hotel, formerly a notorious place.

The door in the floor was closed by the last man, and he followed his companions, who had made no pause.

The cellar was a wretched affair, but they did not halt there. A hidden door opened in the wall, and the men passed on, bearing Buckskin Dick to this underground retreat.

Had the captured man been conscious, he would have felt surprised at the place in which he was finally deposited, after having come through such a wretched hole. It was a well-lighted room and comfortably fitted up.

The captive was unceremoniously dropped on the floor by the men, who had pulled some black masks down over their faces as they came along the dark passage.

"Put the irons on him," commanded one, who appeared to be a sort of leader. "Have him fast by the time he recovers. The Queen will give you further orders."

So, when Buckskin Dick came to his senses, he found himself reclining on a comfortable couch, with iron shackles on his wrists and his ankles. Not far away sat a masked man, who appeared to be on guard.

Dick lay quite still for some time, looking around and trying to think what had happened. His head was aching terribly, and he knew he had been struck from behind.

Where was he?

He asked himself the question, but was unable to answer. All at once, he realized there were irons on his wrists and feet. Still, he was certain he had not been arrested, as this could not possibly be a police station.

"Look here, pard," said the unfortunate captive, after some moments of silence, "I want to wag my jaw a bit."

"Wag away," was the retort.

"Am I in New York or am I in Colorado?"

"New York, old cove."

"Well, I'm blowed if I would believe it if you didn't say so! Of course, I could never think of doubting your word, but if you

didn't tell me straight this yere was New York, I'd reckon I'd been scooped in by a gang of Rocky Mountain outlaws, only this place 'd been apt to be a cave."

The guard said nothing. Evidently he did not see the call for talking when no questions were asked.

"What's all this racket about, anyway?" asked Dick.

"You will find out soon. Don't be in a hurry."

"Am I to lose my scalp? or is this a simple case of fork over so much scudi and you can skip?"

The soft tinkle of a bell sounded near at hand.

"Perhaps the Queen will explain," said the guard. "They are coming to take you before her."

"And I am to be presented to the Queen? Great honor! But I'm not in court attire."

"Never mind; she won't kick on that account."

Two cloaked and cowed figures advanced into the room.

"Arise," said one of them, speaking to Dick. "You are summoned to appear before the Queen."

"And do you expect me to toddle in this rig?" questioned the captive, glancing down at the irons on his ankles.

"The chain is quite long enough to allow you to take short steps."

This was found to be true. With one of the cloaked and hooded forms on either hand, Buckskin Dick marched from the room to another, where he saw five figures like his escorts sitting about in a circle.

At one side of the room was a large raised chair, a sort of throne. And there, attired from head to feet in flaming scarlet, her face concealed by a crimson mask, sat a shapely woman.

About her head was twined a serpent of pure silver, which served as a crown. Its head was lifted and its mouth wide open, as if about to strike. A reddish gleam flashed from its ruby eyes.

Buckskin Dick was in the power of the Snake Gang!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE QUEEN AND HER COUNTERPART.

THE man from Colorado started when his eyes fell on the figure of the woman, and it was with difficulty he repressed a cry of astonishment.

He believed he knew her!

Her bodice was low, the round white-throat being exposed, while her perfectly-molded arms were bare. She made a striking picture, and one could not but believe her face, hidden by the mask, was very beautiful.

She gazed searchingly at Buckskin Dick, who was placed in a standing posture before her. He looked squarely into her eyes, but she did not quail.

The escorts fell back, after making some kind of a salute and a low bow.

After a few seconds of silence, she spoke:

"I am the Queen of the Clan Gang. These are the seven councillors of the Clan. You are in the Hall of Judgment."

"Under the circumstances," observed Dick, "I presume it is the proper thing for me to be filled with great awe. You are at liberty to imagine me bubbling over with awe."

The Queen stamped her crimson-slipped foot.

"Do you dare jest?" she cried, sternly.

"You know the gravity of your position. You are in our power, and we can do as we like with you. If we choose, you will disappear from the world as completely as if annihilated and blotted out of existence in an instant. Your fate will remain forever a mystery."

The captive tossed his head.

"Why resort to this farce?" he asked, scornfully. "If you intend to murder me, go ahead with your sport. There is no need of so much ceremony."

He was bold and defiant.

"Perhaps I may see fit to break that iron spirit before I am done with you."

Up to this moment Dick had controlled himself marvelously, but now, more than at first, he felt that he knew the Woman in

Scarlet. Her voice, her every gesture reminded him of one he had loved—one he had fancied as pure and sinless as a child.

"Lucy!" he groaned. "My God! is it possible?"

The Queen laughed.

"I fancied your spirit could be broken," she said. "I was not mistaken."

The words cut him to the heart.

"Are you so changed—so cruel, so heartless?" came from his white lips.

All his resolution to be cool and unnerved was useless. He had endured the strain but a moment, and then, realizing the terrible truth, he had partially broken down.

And the Woman in Scarlet rejoiced!

Was it possible this creature was the same he had taken to his bosom as a young and trusting bride? Could it be she had seemed so innocent and pure and childlike?

"I won't believe it!" he cried, again lifting his head. "You are *not* my lost Lucy!"

"Have I claimed as much?"

"But that voice—that figure—"

"You fancy you recognize me by such means?"

"If you are not Lucy, my faithless wife, you must be her perfect double."

"How do you know that much? You have not yet seen my face."

A sigh of relief passed his lips.

"True, true!" he exclaimed. "Though your voice and your form are those of my wife, your face may be different."

"You shall judge."

She stood up before him and suddenly removed the mask.

A cry broke from his lips and he staggered back a step, lifting a hand to his eyes.

"Great God! It is my wife!"

There was no longer any doubt. The face was that of the one who had proved false to her marriage vows.

Was it Nadine Van Dyke?

Old Jasper Van Dyke would have sworn the unmasked Woman in Scarlet was his daughter!

For some moments Buckskin Dick kept his eyes covered, and when he lowered his hands, a hard look was creeping slowly over his face.

"Are you satisfied, my gallant husband?" asked the strange woman, who seemed to rejoice in her own infamy. "You can no longer have doubts?"

"No; my doubts are removed. From this on, I shall believe you capable of *anything*!"

"And you will be pretty nearly right. I *am* capable of anything."

She had seemed like a fair and fresh young girl to him, but now, robed in scarlet, she was the perfect type of alluring and sensuous sin. The face was the same, yet it was changed. All the childish innocence had faded from her wonderful brown eyes, and she stood revealed, a woman of experience, and evil, unspeakable experience at that.

Yet, she was beautiful, she was alluring. She was such a woman as most men rave over—she was such a woman as leads many men to perdition.

Vice had not lined her face or robbed her of the bloom of perfect youth. It was plain she had taken the most delicate and assiduous care of her person, and if many years had passed over her since mature maidenhood came, she had escaped their blight.

Although she now appeared a woman, instead of an innocent girl, she was yet a young and beautiful creature.

She sunk back to her cushioned throne, a perfect queen of sin. There were jewels on her wrists and her marble throat. Diamonds of the purest water sparkled there. Her lips were ruby and her teeth milky white.

"Well," she laughed, "it is really a pleasure to reveal myself to you, dear old lubby. What a consummate dupe you proved to be in those days, which now seem so very far away! You accepted me without a doubt—without a question—took me to your heart and gave me the shelter I sorely needed. I played you for a sucker, and a most delightful one you proved."

He ground his teeth together, but uttered no word.

"Does it make you feel like kicking your-

self to know what a chump you were?" she questioned.

"I feel only sorrow and shame for you."

"Then you man as well let up on feeling at all, for I don't need any pity. I was a bad 'un before you ever saw me, and it was mighty hard to play the goody-good 'so long as I did. When Lucky Luke came along, I was struck by his dashing manner, but, do you know? I had really thought of leading a straight life—I had contemplated living square with you and putting the past behind me. For that reason, I rebuffed the sport for a time, but I could not stick to it. The bad in me got the upperhand, and I lit out with him."

"I am bad by nature, Dick, and you may think yourself well off to be clear of me. My mother was crooked and my father killed a man. When I married you I was a fugitive from justice. That surprises you, eh? Well, it is true. The dogs of the law drove me into that wild section, and that is how I came to meet you. You are a handsome fellow, Dick, and I'll allow I was taken with you for a time; but it was only fancy."

"What had I done? Well, I was mixed up in a big swindle and blackmailing scheme. My partners came to hard luck, for they were pinched. I escaped by a miracle. No matter just what the scheme was; it didn't go."

"The West was new to me, and I had to live, so I hitched to you. That's the whole of it, except that I got sick of Lucky Luke pretty quick and dropped him with a dull thud. He has given me no end of trouble since then, but he won't bother me much more."

The man from Colorado listened without a word to the story of the Scarlet Woman. He believed her, difficult though it was, and he saw he had really been terribly deceived in the girl he supposed so pure and innocent.

"Why are you passing yourself off as the daughter of that unsuspecting old man?" he asked.

She seemed puzzled, for she knit her brow and pursed her lips. Suddenly, her face cleared, and she laughed shortly.

"Even you have been fooled by the resemblance?" she questioned.

"It was no resemblance. You have been calling yourself Nadine Van Dyke."

"Good!" she cried. "Even you were fooled! Why shouldn't others be?"

He did not understand her, and she did not give him much time for speculation. As she deftly readjusted her crimson mask, she said:

"Nadine Van Dyke is a very nice little girl—very nice, indeed!" with a sneer. "I am really flattered that you mistook her for me. Just now, she happens to be in the same fix that you are."

"What do you mean?"

"She is a captive in our hands."

Dick started. Could this be true? It explained Nadine's disappearance, but—His head was filled with a confusion of thoughts.

"You do not believe it?" questioned the Queen.

"Bring her here—let me see her, and then I will believe."

"I will do it!"

She left the cushioned chair and hastened from the room, abandoning Dick to the charge of the seven crows, sitting like images about the place.

In a few moments, he heard her returning.

"Right this way, my dear," she cried, and there was a hateful ring to her voice.

Into the room walked the Scarlet Woman, and at her side was Nadine Van Dyke, pale, drooping tearful.

Buckskin Dick stared and stared. He looked from one to the other, and he saw the eyes of the Queen glitter triumphantly through the twin holes of her flaming mask.

Still there were doubts in the mind of the Westerner. It did not seem possible he had been deceived to such an extent by a mere resemblance.

Nadine saw him and held out her trembling hands appealingly.

"Save me!" she entreated.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EVIL WOMAN'S TRIUMPH.

BUCKSKIN DICK stood like a man dazed by an astounding revelation. It was impossible for him to aid the beautiful girl, for the irons on his wrists and ankles prevented, but he might have been powerless to move just then had he been free.

Was not *this* his lost Lucy?

And yet there stood the Scarlet Woman, triumphant, sneering, gloating!

He was forced to confess to himself that he had been deceived in a most astounding manner. But the resemblance was so marvelous that any one would have been deceived.

"Save me from these cruel creatures!" cried Nadine, once more. "Take me to my home!"

She seemed to forget that this man of the Western wilds had faced her in her own home and accused her of faithlessness—of treachery. She only saw he was not like the others—he was not one of her feared and hated captors.

For answer, he held up his manacled wrists.

A cry of despair broke from her lips.

"And are you, too, a captive? Great Heaven! who will aid me in this hour of trouble!"

She sunk on her knees, covering her pale face with her hands, sobs shaking her shapely form. And every sob tore the heart of the iron-bound captive.

At this moment a commotion arose in another part of this crooks' hide-out. Loud cries came to the ears of the ones gathered in the Hall of Judgment, and it was evident a struggle was taking place near at hand.

With an exclamation of anger and dismay the Queen darted away and disappeared.

Buckskin Dick started toward Nadine, but he was prevented by two of the seven judges, while two others quickly removed the girl captive.

"Wretches! dastards!" cried Dick; "you shall suffer for this! Can such things be in this part of the country? Can such a band of devils exist and escape the hand of the law!"

He struggled fearfully, and, ironed though he was, it took the combined strength of two men to hold him secure. Once he came near tearing the cowl from the head of one of them.

"It is well you did not succeed, came sternly from the hidden lips. "If you had, you would have sealed your own doom! Be quiet! You are making a fool of yourself!"

The captive suddenly came to the same conclusion, and he stood quite still.

No longer were the sounds of a struggle outside to be heard, and the two judges who had escorted Nadine from the hall soon returned and resumed their regular positions.

A few seconds later, the masked Queen—the Woman in Scarlet—reappeared and took her place in the cushioned chair.

"The flurry is over," she laughed. "It was one of the captives who made a foolish rush for liberty. It was very silly, for there is no possible way of escape. He simply got himself hurt, and he is now right back where he started from."

Dick said nothing. The two judges had fallen back as soon as their Queen entered, but they were near enough to grasp the Westerner should he attempt to do anything desperate.

The captive was filled with wonder at the iniquity of the cool woman before him. He could not understand how he had ever mistaken her for an innocent and helpless girl. She was now the very personification of sensual sin, even to the flaming garments she wore.

She watched his countenance with evident interest. Above her shapely head rose the serpent crown, and the red eyes of the reptile seemed to glow with life and rancor. It was a perfect symbol of the treacherous nature of its wearer.

That her crooked ways had been profitable, the flashing diamonds upon her person indicated. Yet he could not quite understand how one with such a sweet face could steep herself in evil that she might obtain a few sparkling gems, not one of which could stop the encroachment of the relentless years or bring her peace and love when the withering

blight had fallen on her and beauty vanished forever.

She seemed to read his very thoughts, and she laughed at them.

"When that time comes I will be ready to die," she said. "I believe in living while I can, and letting the future take care of itself. Eat, drink and be merry, for to-morrow you die. To-morrow is a promise that may never come; make the best of to-day. What is there to live for in old age, anyway? Bah! When youth and beauty fade, death is welcome."

That was her philosophy. It has lured many a woman on to ruin and doom.

"You do not seem inclined to talk, husband mine," she went on, merrily. "Don't be so down-hearted. You will pull through this little racket all right, for I have no thought of cutting short your thread of existence. You were far too good and obliging in the old days when I needed you. If you let me alone now, I won't bother you."

"This looks like it!" was his contemptuous retort.

"This was necessary. You were liable to give me trouble at any time. I wanted an understanding with you, and this is the way I brought it about. I wanted you to know Lucky Luke is no longer anything to me. I have cut clear of him. If you can do him up to a brown turn, you will please me mightily."

A strange look settled on Buckskin Dick's face.

"From this hour, Lucky Luke is safe so far as I am concerned," he declared.

"What?" she cried astounded.

"I have only pity for him," the Westerner went on, his words biting deep. "I thought he robbed me of something; I now know he did me a favor. Treacherous friend though he was, I fancy he has received his punishment."

She sunk back in the chair, drawing a long breath.

"Well, you do take the prize! I fancied I could depend on you to avenge yourself."

"There is nothing to avenge."

She stamped one slippered foot angrily.

"Can it be you are Richard Cutting? Are you the man who was so ready in other days to avenge the slightest insult? It does not seem possible!"

He smiled grimly.

"I am ready as ever to seek vengeance when vengeance is deserved; but this case is different."

"Do you know I have power to end your life? Do you know you can never leave this place if I speak the word?"

"Speak it!"

"You dare me?"

"Yes."

For a few moments it seemed her anger would get the best of her, but she finally forced a laugh.

"You never did fear man or devil," was her confession. "I see you have not changed. It was that utter fearlessness that came so near making me love you. You were magnificent in those days; you are magnificent still."

He made a gesture of appeal.

"For Heaven's sake spare me this!" he cried. "I can endure your scorn, your hatred, even death at your hands without a word; but I entreat you to spare your praise—your flattery!"

"Praise it may be, but flattery it is not. You wrong me in thinking I would resort to any such expedient. I do not seek any favors of you, and I know I cannot have your love after what I have revealed to you. Then why should I attempt to flatter you? You do not understand me even now, I speak my mind—I simply told you what was true."

"Then, for my sake, do not speak the truth! Have you not found satisfaction enough in opening my eyes to your black heart?"

"You're not gallant, Dick. But, when I have told you a little more, you may think it best to down Luke Trask before he downs you. You fancied he did not know you were on his trail, but you were mistaken. He discovered you had in some mysterious way escaped death at his hands, and he knew you were resolved on vengeance. It was by accident he gave you the slip so many times when you were close upon him

and fancied he was the same as in your grasp. He feared you. At last, he came to New York, and he resolved to remain. He hired two thugs to assassinate you, and they attacked you a few nights ago on Broadway. They were Cadger Jim and Slinky Mike. Thanks to Manton Burke, that confounded detective, you escaped death at the hands of the toughs. They were pinched, but you did not appear against them. Friends were working for them, and they are scot free this night, ready to try their luck on you again. Luke is still backing them. It is now a case of kill him or he will kill you. You pays your money and takes your choice."

"He is less than I thought him, for I did fancy he had some manhood about him. His hired tools may find me ready for them next time."

"If you down them, more will follow. Your only way is to down the man who backs them."

"You may be right; time will tell."

"Ah!" she laughed, satisfied; "I fancied you could be brought to your senses. I should really hate to see him lay you out."

"But, why do you talk of this? I am a captive in your hands. Do you intend to set me free?"

"Exactly that."

"Impossible!"

"It is true. What did you fancy I meant to do? I'm not going to snuff you out—oh, no! You're too good a man for that. We have come to an understanding."

"And now, are you going to set me free?"

"In due time, Richard; in due time. Don't be in too much of a hurry. I have plans of which you are not aware, and I always carry out my plans. You will see I really bear you no ill-will, though it did my soul good to show you what a blooming chump you had been; but I want to warn you I shall not take it good-naturedly if you trouble me after this night."

"Trouble you! I know nothing about you. I mistook that unfortunate girl for you, blind man that I was. I am not liable to trouble her any more. What do you mean to do with her?"

The Queen shrugged her shoulders.

"Hold her for ransom, maybe."

"You will bring disaster on yourself."

"How?"

"Do you know how her disappearance has stirred up New York?"

"I know all about it."

"The city police are hunting for her; Manton Burke is seeking a clue."

"I fear Old Deadsure more than all the police. If he once gets a clue to the truth, he will never pause till he has followed it to the end. He is the relentless foe of this order, and we are his. Some day he will vanish and never be heard of again."

"Before that time comes, it is likely he will have brought to justice the last one of this infamous organization."

"We won't discuss that. Manton Burke has nothing to do with the matter in which you are most interested just now, your release."

"It is not that in which I am the most interested."

"What, then?"

"The release of Nadine Van Dyke."

"Ha! Is it possible you have fallen in love with her?"

"Not that; but I am interested in her. I misjudged and wronged her."

"That's of little consequence. I may take another fancy to keep her here until I win the love of her cousin."

"Evan Rodman?"

"Yes."

"Keep clear of him. He loves her."

"And she cares nothing for him."

"How do you know?"

"I have ways of finding out things. He is likewise a captive in my hands."

"What?"

"It is true. I took a fancy to gather them both in. I shall not set you free until I have accomplished what I have planned. Then you will be released, and, unless you intend to get at Lucky Luke, the best thing you can do is to return at once to Colorado. Your hunt will be ended."

"Do you fancy I will leave you to carry out any infamous plot you may concoct?"

Again she stamped her foot.

"You had better think twice before interfering with me! I have power, and I can crush you any time."

"Such a threat amounts to nothing with me."

She waved her hand and the two waiting Judges stepped forward.

"Take him away."

Dick was grasped on either side and led from the Hall. He made not the slightest resistance, but went along willingly, the iron chain at his ankles clanking dolefully.

Along the passage they went. He did not notice whether they were taking him, for his head was bowed and his mind was full of bitter thoughts.

They came to a door that was locked, but they soon unfastened it and thrust the captive in. The door clanged, the bolt shot into its socket, and the retreating footsteps of the two men were heard dying out in the distance.

Just outside the door swung an oil lamp, the light of which came through the heavy grating and partially illuminated the interior of the dungeon-like place.

Dick looked around. Sitting on a couch a short distance away was a human figure. There was another inmate of the wretched place, and his face was buried in his hands.

"Hello, pard," called the Westerner.

The man looked up, his face seeming haggard in the light that sifted through the iron bars.

It was Evan Rodman!

CHAPTER XVIII.

DICK AND EVAN.

"Who are you?" asked Evan. "Have you come here to taunt me?"

"Never a bit of it," retorted Dick, relieved to find some one else in misery, as most men really are. "You seem to be in a box, like myself."

"Are you a captive in the hands of this band of infamous villains?"

For reply, the Westerner rattled his chains.

Evan was astounded.

"Ironed?" he cried. "Is it possible?"

"I reckon it is, partner. I suppose they were afraid of me, and so they hooked me up tight and fast. You're in luck not to be ornamented in a similar manner."

"Who are you?" again asked Evan.

"I'm Buckskin Dick, of Colorado. I reckon you are Evan Rodman, though we never have met before. I know something about you, just the same, having taken an interest in you."

"Taken an interest in me?"

"Yes."

"How is that? I do not understand."

"I cannot explain."

Evan was mystified. He did not remember seeing this strange man before, yet Dick said he had taken an interest in him. The young man was instantly suspicious.

"Is this another trick of my enemies?" he asked himself.

Buckskin Dick read the doubts in his companion's face.

"I'm on the dead level, pard," the man from Colorado asserted. "You have no reason to fear me."

But that was not enough.

"You have made declarations you were not ready to explain."

"I confess it, yet I only spoke the truth. Manton Burke—"

"Do you know Old Deadsure?"

"I do."

"Go on."

"He said some things that led me to find out about you."

"Are you a detective?"

"Yes, a detective on my own hook and working up my own case."

"I fail to see how I am involved."

"Never mind that now. I know you, and we are captives here together. For the time, at least, our interests are mutual. This Woman in Scarlet—"

"For God's sake tell me something of her! She is a puzzle to me—she had set my brain whirling! I will not believe she can be Nadine—innocent little Nadine, my beautiful cousin!"

"In that you are quite right."

"But she has Nadine's face, her form, her voice—even her gestures are Nadine's!"

"True."

"It has set my brain on fire! I am confused and bewildered. If you can make it clear to me, you will win my everlasting gratitude."

"She is Nadine's double."

"Such a thing does not seem possible. I have thought of it, but—but I doubt—I do not know what to think."

"You are in as bad a pickle as I was a short time ago, pard. I thought sure the two must be one and the same; now, I know they are not."

"How do you know?"

"I have seen them both together."

Evan sprung up and caught hold of Dick's shoulder.

"Do you speak the truth?"

"I do."

The young man drew a deep breath of relief.

"You have brought me a great joy," he declared. "Even while I could not believe this voluptuous Scarlet Queen could be dear little Nadine, I was tortured by the most hellish doubts. Even Nadine is a mystery to me. She seems to hate me and she seems to love me. I cannot fathom her. I love her madly at times, and yet I am filled with remorse at my treachery toward a good, true girl."

"But, what am I saying? You are a stranger. This cannot interest you. I am so broken up I scarcely know what words pass my lips."

"You are mistaken when you think it does not interest me, for it does. I knew this Scarlet Woman years ago, and when I saw your cousin, I mistook her for the other. Let that go for a partial explanation of my interest in the affair. Did not your cousin tell you how I accused her?"

"Not a word."

"That is strange. I confronted her beneath Jasper Van Dyke's room and reviled her. She swore I had made a mistake, but I left the house firm in the belief that I was right. Not until this night have I for one moment doubted that Nadine was the one I knew in Colorado."

"That is impossible, for my cousin has been away to school—or to some kind of a convent. I don't know where, for uncle never told me. He is strange—has been peculiar ever since he lost his first fortune. Some said at the time that his mind was affected, but that could not be, as he has since made a still larger fortune. I do not notice his queer ways, as I have become used to them."

They talked a few minutes, and then Evan drew Dick to the couch, on which they both sat. The light sifted through the grating and fell on their faces.

Of a sudden, Evan seemed smitten with a thought.

"You say you saw Nadine and the Scarlet Woman together? Where?"

"In a room they call the Judgment Hall."

Evan groaned.

"Then, it is true, she is a captive in the hands of this Queen of Iniquity?"

"Yes."

"I would not believe it; now I must."

"There is no doubt about it. But, tell me your own story; how came you here?"

For some moments the young man was silent, his head bowed. At length he lifted his white face.

"I was lured into a trap," he said. "I suppose you heard of the affair at Wolford's? I was accused of being the thief who has been giving New York's best society so much trouble of late."

"I read the account in the papers."

"Well, I was cut dead by my former friends. It is plain nearly everybody believes me the thief. I remained in my uncle's house until I became desperate. The horror and disgrace was so great I even thought of suicide. Then I received a note. It was written in a woman's hand, and asked me to meet her on the East Side. She claimed to know the man Smith who charged me with being the robber, and she said she could put me onto something that would enable me to clear myself. She said she was ready to do the trick for revenge, but a little money would make the inducement all the greater."

"I freely confess I bit at the bait. I was eager for anything that would clear me, and

I hastened to keep the appointment. A veiled woman met me. She was young, but I did not see her face. She asked me to take her into a restaurant and buy her some wine, saying we would chat over the wine without arousing suspicion. I did as she asked. She only lifted her veil to her mouth when she drank. It did not take her long to convince me she really knew Smith and could be of value in aiding me to clear myself. I suppose I must have been taken off my guard. I drank some of the wine and felt sleepy. That is all I remember until I found myself a captive in the hands of this 'gang.'"

"What kind of a ranch did you run into, pard?"

"I don't know; I'll acknowledge I did not pay much attention to the place."

"You were drugged."

"Of course."

"Well, if you city chaps can be wooled in that way, I don't know as I ought to be ashamed of being tapped on the head in the open street and sacked in here. By the way, have you any idea what kind of a place we are in?"

"No."

"Nor I."

"I have been too confused to think of anything of that sort since the Scarlet Woman came to this hole and attempted to make love to me."

"She did that?"

"Yes."

"What was her object?"

"She wanted me to aid her in carrying out a nefarious scheme to rob my uncle."

Buckskin Dick was interested. He meant to balk the evil woman's plots as far as possible.

"What was her plan?"

"She was to return to the house as Nadine. I was to go with her, and we would invent a yarn to deceive the old man about our absence. You will understand the condition I was in when I was unable to tell whether she was Nadine or not. I raved at her—I accused her—I even cursed her! She laughed and tried to wind her arms about my neck, holding up her lips for me to kiss."

The young man paused, and Dick saw he was confused. The man from Colorado whistled softly, but uttered not a questioning word.

"I was mad enough or foolish enough to succumb to her arts for a moment," Evan acknowledged, after a time; "but it was only for a moment. Then something told me it could not be Nadine—something made her seem repugnant to me. I thrust her away and would have no more to do with her, even though she tried all her alluring wiles."

"If you are Nadine Van Dyke," I cried, "you are not what I thought. If you are not Nadine, you must be Jezebel in the guise of a pure and sweet girl! Get from me!"

"She left me, laughing and promising to come again."

"You will get over this after a while, my dear," she said. "Better love, freedom and wealth with me than to die in this place."

"I have not seen her since, but I have suffered the tortures of the fiery pit, for it did not seem possible there could be two girls in the world so much alike in person, one sweet and innocent, the other vile and sinful."

"My boy," said Buckskin Dick, "there are all manner of beautiful women in the world. We have both discovered a woman's character cannot be judged at all times by the look of her face."

While they were talking, they were startled by the sound of flying footsteps, light but swift. They started up and looked out into the lighted passage, being just in time to see a female figure come staggering and panting beneath the glare of the light, where she paused for an instant to look back, as if dreading pursuit.

"Merciful Heaven protect me!" she sobbed. "I have escaped that drunken wretch, but how can I get out of this horrible place?"

It was Nadine's voice!

CHAPTER XIX.

ESCAPE.

LIKE a flash of lightning, Buckskin Dick caught hold of Evan Rodman and clapped a hand over the young man's mouth.

Just in time.

But for that swift movement, Evan would have uttered a loud cry.

As it was, the exclamation was smothered, but the girl heard it, and she wheeled toward the dungeon, seeming on the point of sinking in a swoon.

"Don't be frightened," spoke the man from Colorado, in a low voice. "We are your friends."

The light that sifted through the grating did not show the interior of the dungeon very plainly, and Nadine seemed incredulous. She started to move away, but Evan freed his lips and said:

"Nadine! It is true—it is true!"

"Merciful Heaven!" she gasped, staggering to the door and clutching the bars while she peered through. "Can that be my cousin's voice?"

"It is, sweetheart!" responded the young man, breaking from Dick and clasping her hands at the grating. "I am here."

"But, I do not understand. How—how—"

"I am a captive, like yourself. If I could only get beyond this cursed door, they should never lay their vile hands on you again, my darling! I would defend you with my life!"

"This is a bad time for chinning," cut in the Westerner. "What's that you have in your hands, Miss Van Dyke?"

"Those are the keys. I took them from my guard, who was drunk and came into my room to make love to me. He fell asleep; I got the keys, unlocked the door and slipped away. I did not know I had kept the keys clutched in my hands."

"She was shaking with excitement, though trying to appear cool. Her face was very pale, and she held fast to the iron bars for support."

Dick was the only cool one of the trio.

"The keys!" he exclaimed. "Try them in this lock! Lively! One of them may fit!"

With a mighty effort, she stood erect and attempted to fit one of the keys to the lock, but her hands were still shaking, and she failed.

"I can't!" she moaned. "I feel dizzy! I—"

She stopped, uttering not another sound, and sunk prone upon the floor, lying white and still.

And then even Buckskin Dick lost his coolness.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "She has fainted!"

Evan was simply distracted. He wrung his hands and beat them against the bars in his mad endeavor to reach the prostrate girl.

"The jig is up!" muttered the Westerner. "They'll discover she has escaped and be after her before she comes to her senses again."

It was bitter luck when, as it seemed, freedom had been so near at hand.

Evan was not thinking of that. The light of the lamp fell fairly on the pallid upturned face of the girl, and the sight filled him with frenzy.

"She is dead!" he groaned.

"Nothing of the kind," promptly assured Buckskin Dick. "She has fainted."

"But she will surely die unless she brought out of this. Gods! Is there no way to get out of this dungeon?"

"Easy, lad!" cautioned the man from Colorado. "Don't lift your voice! You'll bring the imps of Satan down on us, and then the game will be blocked for sure."

It was with the greatest difficulty he succeeded in calming Evan in a measure. Then the young man got down on his knees and, with his face pressed against the iron, began to call softly to Nadine.

"Nadine!" he murmured, passionately.

"Awaken, darling! Can't you hear me? Wake up! wake up! Don't lie there so white and still! Nadine, my darling, you must hear me!"

For some time she did not move, but at length, a faint rose came from her lips. Evan renewed his imploring words, and she finally opened her eyes very slowly.

"Get up, dear!" he urged. "Be strong now, everything depends on it. If you can unlock this door, we may escape."

At first, she did not seem to comprehend.

"What is it?" she whispered, looking toward him wonderingly. "Where am I?"

And then, all at once, she struggled up, supporting herself with one hand on the floor, while she stared around wildly.

"The keys!" excitedly exclaimed Evan. "Try the keys!"

At last she seemed to understand, and she pulled herself to her feet, the bunch of keys in her grasp.

"Yes," she whispered, leaning heavily against the door. "Yes, I will try them."

One, two, three were fitted into the lock, but each failed to throw the bolt. The fourth one worked—the bolt shot back—the grated door swung open!

In another moment Evan had her drooping form in his arms, and was covering her face with kisses.

Clank, clank, clank! Buckskin Dick came forth, the chain rattling at his ankles.

"Curse the thing!" he grated, under his breath. "If I were but clear of it now, we would defy the whole infernal gang!"

He gave a savage twist at the manacles which held his wrists, but they were solid.

However, Dick did not despair. Instead of that, there was a great hope in his heart.

"Here, here, young people!" he whispered, catching hold of them. "No time for this! We must make a break, and make it right lively. The whole outfit is liable to be after us hot foot in less than three shakes of a lammy's tail. It behooves us to get a gentle hustle on."

"Which way shall we go? Where can we go?" asked Evan.

Dick looked about and almost instantly decided.

"This way," he said.

They followed him. He moved as cautiously as possible, so the chain would not betray them. It clanked horribly, and it seemed as if the whole place must be aroused.

In a few moments they came to a bolted door. This was thrown open, and they found themselves looking into a black, cellar-like place, from which came a damp smell.

Nadine drew back with a shudder.

"We can't get out this way!" exclaimed Evan, in dismay.

"I'm not so sure of that," responded the Westerner. "There may be an underground passage that will lead us to freedom. If we had a light. Young man, run back there and get that lamp. Be lively!"

Evan hesitated an instant, and then he obeyed. He soon secured the oil lamp and returned. The light showed them a passage that led on into blank and utter darkness.

"Shall we trust ourselves there?" questioned Evan, in doubt.

"Hark!"

They listened. Distant cries came to their ears.

"Great Moses! they have discovered Miss Van Dyke is missing!" With these words, Dick turned toward the dark passage.

"Those whelps are coming!" he exclaimed. "This is our only hope! Go on. I will close the door behind us."

CHAPTER XX.

OUT OF THE DEN.

EVAN had the lamp. He grasped Nadine's arm and helped support her. Into the dark cellar-like place they hurried.

Buckskin Dick coolly closed the door, looking to see if there was any means of fastening it.

He found none.

Now that there was a great danger, the Westerner seemed cool as an iceberg.

"If I only had a brace of guns!" he muttered, as he hobbled after the other fugitives. "I could use 'em for all of these damnable irons!"

"Hurry! hurry!" called Evan.

"Go on," commanded Dick. "Don't mind me. Save that young lady for all of anything else."

"Don't leave him!" entreated Nadine. "I am strong now. They will murder him, if they overtake him!"

After the closing of the door, the cries no longer came to their ears for a time, but, all at once, a wild chorus of yells, muffled but terrible, reached their ears.

The Clan had discovered the escape of Dick and Evan.

"That beats me," thought the man from Colorado. "How those whelps dare make such a racket here is more than I understand. I should think they would be heard in the street above and bring the whole police force of the locality down on them."

He did not pause to speculate over that matter, for time was very precious just then, and the young couple in advance was urging him to renew his speed.

His chains clanked and rattled as he leaped along, fleeing by huge bounds rather than by steps.

It was not long before the sounds from the pursuers told they had opened the door and entered the underground passage.

After a few moments, this place ceased to be like a cellar and was plainly a passage that had been constructed by the crooks of the great city to enable them to escape from their hidden retreat in case the police came down on them suddenly. It grew narrower and narrower until, at one point, the escaping captives were forced to pass through one at a time.

The chain so hampered Buckskin Dick that he was panting like an overdriven horse.

Just as the narrow place was reached, the pursuers were heard shouting:

"See! see! There they are! there they are!"

"They are bound to overtake us at this rate!" grated the man from Colorado.

"What's to be done?"

He instantly decided the question.

"Rodman," he called, "make a big rush with the lady—get for all you are worth! Don't mind me."

"What are you going to do?" called Evan.

"Show those galoots the kind of timber they have in the wild and woolly West. If they think I can't fight simply because they've trussed me up this way they'll find they are slightly mistaken. Go on, I say! Get! We'll all be taken, if you stop to chin!"

They saw he was in earnest, and so the young couple hurried on into the darkness, taking the lamp with them, leaving bold Buckskin Dick crouching in the black narrowness of the reeking passage.

The pursuers bore lights, and he could see them plainly. They were masked.

"We're going to have a regular rough old rustle," he mentally observed, as he braced himself for the encounter. "It has been a long, long time since I bucked up against any such racket as this yere."

In the mean time, Evan was urging Nadine on, and the girl ran with great swiftness for one who had so shortly before lain helpless and unconscious on the floor of the crooks' hide-out.

To their intense astonishment, they did not have to go far before they suddenly found themselves at the water's edge standing beneath what seemed to be an old pier.

It was by a rare chance they avoided plunging headlong into the river.

"Look!"

At their feet lay a boat!

Their further escape was provided for.

With a feeling of dismay, Evan realized they would have to desert Buckskin Dick—leave the bold Westerner to his fate. Listening, they could hear sounds of a fierce battle coming from the passage. The ringing voice of the man from Colorado was calling defiance to his foes, while they resorted to shouts of fury.

"Come on, you miserable dogs!" thundered Dick. "One man in irons is a match for your whole onery gang!"

"Too bad!" muttered Evan, as he pushed the boat down into the water, swiftly untying the painter that held it from going adrift. "That is a brave and noble fellow. It seems cowardly to leave him thus!"

"It does!" sobbed Nadine, wringing her hands. "What can we do?"

"Nothing but get away and then inform the police. They may be able to come on this nest of criminals and pull our friend out."

He urged the girl into the boat, and then they pushed off, leaving the lamp sitting on the ground at the mouth of the passage, which at high tide must have received much of the river's wash.

With strong and sturdy strokes, Evan pulled the boat from beneath the pier out upon the dark bosom of the river, where the turning tide was just beginning to run in.

"We are free!" he muttered, joyously.

"They cannot recapture us now!"

Then, all at once, Nadine's nerve seemed to leave her again. With a low moan, she sunk limply to the bottom of the boat.

In a moment, Evan was on his knees, bending over her, calling to her, kissing her hands, her cheeks and her lips.

"Nadine! Nadine! My love! my sweet one!" he murmured, passionately. "You are safe—safe with me! They cannot harm you now!"

He caught her up in his arms and pressed her to his heart, but her lips did not respond to his feverish caresses. With all the foolish fears of a lover, he imagined she might be dead, even as they had escaped from their foes.

The boat drifted at the mercy of the tide, the oars having slipped from the locks and been carried away on the bosom of the river.

A great ferryboat went lumbering past, its lighted windows gleaming like rows of burning eyes.

Evan heeded not his surroundings for some time, and then, coming to his senses somewhat, he exclaimed:

"Fool! fool!"

He looked for the oars, and a cry of dismay broke from his lips when he found they were gone.

"While I have been dallying here they have floated away!" he groaned. "And now she may die in the boat before I can reach a physician!"

He began to call for aid.

A small tug came cutting through the water, whistling a signal to a ferryboat crossing from the Brooklyn shore. The little rowboat lay directly in the course of the swift-moving tug.

"They will run us down!" gasped the young man, as he redoubled his cries.

For a while, it seemed that such a catastrophe would surely happen, but, all at once, the pilot of the tug saw them, and the craft shot past, narrowly missing the small boat.

"What's the matter there?" called a voice from the tug.

"Help!" appealed Evan, in response. "We are adrift without any oars! I have a lady here. Save us!"

The supplication was not in vain. Twenty minutes later, the small boat was being towed to a pier, and it was not long before Evan and Nadine were in a cab which was taking them toward Jasper Van Dyke's home on Fifth avenue.

The girl had recovered before taken in tow by the tug, and so no suspicion that anything was wrong was entertained, for Evan told a satisfactory story about the loss of the oars.

The hour was late when the Van Dyke mansion was reached, but Evan proceeded to ring everybody up in the house. In a very short time, the missing girl was in her father's arms.

Old Jasper wept for joy. He had not retired for the night, as he could not sleep, and he declared over and over that he had felt certain a great event was to happen before morning.

The excitement of the occasion caused Evan to forget his resolve to put the police on track of the Snake Gang. It was near morning when he was on the point of starting out to put his plan in operation. At the door he encountered Manton Burke.

"So you are here!" and the detective urged him back into the house. "I suspected as much."

"How, for heaven's sake?"

"The cabby who brought you along is spreading his tale. He has read the newspapers, and he fancied you might be the missing couple. Is Miss Van Dyke all right?"

"She is."

"Well, come in here and tell me all about it."

They entered the library and lighted the gas. Then Evan related his story as briefly and accurately as possible.

"No time is to be lost!" exclaimed Old Deadsure, when he had heard all. "Ten to

one, we'll be left in the lurch now. The Snake Gang is like the nimble flea, mighty hard to put your finger on."

Before they left the house, Manton had a few words with Old Jasper.

"Utterly refuse to be interviewed by reporters," was the instruction given by the detective. "You will have plenty of them after you and Miss Van Dyke. Keep them out of the house at any cost. Let the newspapers surmise whatever they please. It will do no good to tell them the truth, and some of them would be sure to ridicule the story, if not all of them, for it does sound preposterous."

He impressed this upon the old man, who agreed to faithfully obey.

It did not take Manton long to secure the aid of a night patrol boat of the river police, and it was well manned with the ferrets of the water front.

Evan could not tell exactly where the pier was that he and Nadine had come out beneath, but he fancied he could come very near locating it.

As it happened, the tide was so high it bothered them not a little. From pier to pier they went, but their search proved unsuccessful.

Not a trace of the secret passage was discovered, although the morning was well advanced when the search was abandoned.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE WILD GIRL'S FIND.

THE police looked on Evan with suspicion. They did not believe his story.

Manton understood that. Even the Deadsure Detective had doubts.

The vanishing of the young couple, their absence and their return together looked strange.

Still, Evan had told a straight story, and he had surely seemed sincere.

One of the river patrol gave Old Burke a quiet tip that the story was doubted, advising Manton to investigate it thoroughly before going to any more trouble to look after the retreat of the Snake Gang in that locality.

But, when the detective thought it all over soberly, he could but confess that there must be some truth in the narrative, for Evan had told things about the Snake Gang that were not known to the general public.

Then, if the story was untrue, he would not have introduced Buckskin Dick, as that worthy might turn up at any moment and put him to confusion.

Manton had an appointment to meet Dare at an early hour, but he accompanied Evan to Van Dyke's before leaving him.

As the detective had prophesied, reporters were thick about the mansion, to which they had been unable to gain admittance. Three of them stopped, or attempted to stop, Old Burke and Evan and obtain an interview from them.

The detective had an easy way of disposing of the bothersome fellows. He simply looked them squarely in the eye a moment and then commanded them to step aside and remain there five minutes.

For five minutes after he had passed, three gasping newspaper men might have been seen standing rigid in their tracks, staring in astonishment toward the house into which Manton and Evan had vanished.

Manton asked to see Nadine, but he was informed she was in no condition to see any one then. However, she would see him at a later hour, if he would call.

The detective departed, a feeling of deep dissatisfaction in his breast. Things were not moving to suit him at all. He wondered if Dare would have good news.

To his intense disgust, his special spy had anything but pleasant news. Smith had disappeared, and Dare could find no further trace of him.

Old Burke nearly lost patience.

"In all my career," he said, "I have not succeeded so poorly as on this insignificant little matter of catching an aristocratic thief."

Dare flushed.

"I did my best, sir," he asserted.

"I do not doubt that."

"I might have had this Mr. Smith nabbed a dozen times, but— but you—"

"I gave you other instructions. Smith is not the thief."

"Sir, I am sure he had something to do with this last affair at Wolford's."

Manton smiled grimly.

"Oh, yes! he had something to do with it—in fact, he had very much to do with it. He threw the charge on Evan Rodman; but for him, the diamonds would not have been found on Evan, as the young man would not have been forced to submit to search. Smith certainly had something to do with the affair."

"That is not what I mean, Mr. Burke. I had spotted Smith as the thief ere Evan Rodman accused him. By your instructions, I was shadowing him to see if he had an accomplice. Then came the accusation and the astounding termination; but still I think Mr. Smith lifted the diamonds in the first place."

"And got them in Rodman's pocket? By what jugglery could such a thing be done?"

"That is more than I can explain."

Old Deadsure paused in his nervous walking about the room and faced his assistant squarely.

"Dare, I have investigated this Mr. Smith's presence at that ball. It was a most unprecedented affair, for the man is a sort of mysterious unknown. Had the ball been a masquerade, it would have been difficult for such an imposition to be practiced; but, under the circumstances, I must say that such a thing never before occurred in New York's first society. It almost seems an impossibility now. He was introduced there by some one who was able to give him the swing of the place. Nadine Van Dyke knows him, and her lips must solve the mystery. If she is not inclined to speak of her own free will, I have the power to induce her to speak."

"But Smith, I am convinced, cuts a small figure in this matter. He has recently appeared on the horizon; but you will remember these robberies have been going on all through the past season. For that very reason, he cannot be the game we are after, although he may be an accomplice who has just come to the surface."

The young spy nodded.

"That conclusion must be right. Since the affair at Wolford's, he has been very wary. It was reported he had gone West, being called thither by business requiring his immediate attention. It was also reported that he is a very wealthy man, the owner of two or three mines, a ranch, etc. He was said to be a good catch for some of the marriageable young ladies who could not carry off a foreigner with a title. This aided him in creeping into society's iron limits."

"But he suspected he was shadowed, and he gave me hard work to keep track of him. His reported departure for the West was a blind, as he went down on the East Side and buried himself in an attic. He did not stay there long, however. I had a neat little plan of rigging up as a crook down on his luck and taking the other empty room in the attic. In this way I hoped, by skillful management, to get familiar with him. But, all at once, he vanished."

"And you do not know what became of him?"

"No."

"Did he have any visitors after he took the attic room?"

"One."

"Who?"

"Elegant Ell."

Manton's eyes glittered.

"That is interesting," assured the Deadsure Detective. "Elegant Ell may know what became of the mysterious Mr. Smith."

"I have thought so."

"Are you known to the Prince of Crooks?"

"Yes."

"Then disguise yourself and look after him. Find him and shadow him. You may discover what has become of Smith."

Those were all the instructions Manton gave his assistant. He knew Dare would find a way to report, if anything worth reporting happened.

In a short time, Manton saw his assistant depart.

The Deadsure Detective next turned his attention to investigating the East River water front in the vicinity where Evan Rodman had declared he and Nadine came forth from the passage beneath a pier.

Hours were spent in a vain search, and the detective gave it up in disgust.

"If he told the truth," muttered Manton, "the Snake Gang has found a way of closing the mouth of the passage that led down beneath the pier."

Still, he had no thought of abandoning Buckskin Dick to his fate. He had taken an interest in the Westerner, and he did not want to feel that Dick had been wiped out by the crooks who had captured him.

Old Burke swallowed a hasty lunch at a little restaurant and then hastened to Jasper Van Dyke's home to have a talk with Nadine.

He found Evan pacing the library floor like a caged tiger. The young man eagerly demanded to know what progress had been made.

Instead of answering the question, Manton asked the young man to sit down and be cool.

"Cool!" cried Evan. "Impossible!"

"Sit down," commanded Old Deadsure.

The other was forced to obey.

Then the detective sat down facing Evan and looked deep into the young man's eyes. In less than half a minute, Evan Rodman was in a trance-like condition.

"Now," thought Old Burke, "I will know if he spoke the truth when he told me that story."

The hypnotist detective began to question Evan, who was forced to reply truthfully. In a short time, Manton satisfied himself that every word of the remarkable yarn of the capture and escape was to be relied on. Then he released the young man from the trance.

Evan gazed about in a dazed manner, asking:

"What has happened? What have I been saying? I seem to have been asleep."

Manton smiled.

"Nothing of the sort," he replied. "I placed you in a hypnotic trance to see if you could not aid me in discovering the location of that pier which you came out beneath."

"With what success?"

"You told me nothing of value—nothing but you had already told."

"And the den of this ruffianly gang has not been discovered?"

"It has not."

"Then I fear Buckskin Dick is done for."

"We will hope not. I wish to see Miss Van Dyke now."

"I fear that will be impossible. She is quite prostrated by what she has passed through, and the physician has given directions for her to be kept perfectly quiet."

Dick did not depart until he was informed that Evan had spoken the truth in this. Nadine would not be able to see the detective before another day.

That night Old Deadsure made a round of the lower East Side resorts, being in disguise. Any one would naturally have taken him for a full-blooded Irishman, and one not long in this country at that.

As he was making his way along East Broadway a familiar figure suddenly appeared before him.

It was the Wild Girl.

"I know you," declared the strange girl, peering into his face. "You are the man they call Old Deadsure. You are searching for someone. Come with me."

At first, he hesitated about following her, thinking she might lead him into a trap; but he quickly dismissed the idea, as he did not believe she could be used as a decoy by his foes. With his hand gripping the butt of a revolver, he allowed her to lead the way down toward the river.

In an unsavory quarter, she suddenly halted and bent over a figure lying on the rough stones of the dark and deserted street.

Manton turned a tiny flash-light on the face of the man.

It was Buckskin Dick!

CHAPTER XXII.

DICK'S STORY—TELEGRAPHING WITH HIS TEETH.

THE Westerner seemed to be sleeping comfortably on his hard bed, and he would have naturally been taken for a common drunk—a man who had tumbled too much and got down.

He was not intoxicated.

He was drugged!

Old Deadsure decided on that instantly.

"I knew you were looking for him," declared the Wild Girl. "Your foes and his foes are my foes. But you know them not, keen though you are. Ha! ha! They are shrewd—very shrewd! But the vengeance of God shall fall upon them! Their hour approaches!"

Manton turned the light on her face, but she shrunk back lifting her hands. The detective saw she had been beautiful beyond a doubt—she was even beautiful still, though a wild and restless light dwelt in her large eyes.

"Who are you?" asked Old Burke.

She pressed her hands to her head.

"Who am I?" she repeated. "I know—I know, but, somehow, I cannot tell. When I try, it all fades from me. I know they tried to kill me—I know that beautiful fiend was at the bottom of it all; but I have forgotten my own name."

Manton felt that he had struck a mystery.

"Who do you mean by 'that beautiful fiend'?"

"One who rides in her silks—one whom I confronted on a street of this great city and frightened so she fell fainting."

"Her name?"

"I have forgotten it, like my own."

But the detective fancied he knew. This Wild Girl believed Nadine Van Dyke had injured her at some past time.

"There was another who aided her—a man. I have seen him here, but I cannot find him now."

"Do you know how this poor fellow came in this condition?"

She shook her head.

"No. I found him thus; I knew you were searching for him."

The detective bent over Buckskin Dick and tried to arouse him, but the Westerner was strongly locked in the power of the drug, and he did not stir.

Manton lifted his head to ask the Wild Girl more questions.

She was gone!

Like a specter she had vanished.

"Too bad!" thought the detective. "I wish I might turn that poor creature over to some one who could doctor her as she ought to be. If she were in her right mind, she might tell an interesting and remarkable tale."

His next thought was to get Buckskin Dick to the nearest drug store.

As that locality was lonely and deserted, he could not call for assistance, so he lifted the man from the West and slung him over his shoulder.

Thus burdened, the detective made his way to the lighted streets not far away, and he soon had obtained the aid he desired.

Dick was carried into a drug store, and Manton called for a certain decoction, which he forced between the unconscious man's set teeth.

In a short time Dick began to gasp and groan a little, and he soon opened his eyes. He seemed dazed and astounded, being unable to speak for some time.

"You're all right, old fellow," assured Burke, speaking in an undertone. "Just keep cool. In an hour or two you will be as well as ever."

"Eternal snows of the Rockies!" gasped the revived man. "How did I come here? Where am I, anyway?"

"You are in New York."

Dick sat up and looked curiously at his wrists, and then at his ankles.

"They're gone!" he cried, in wonder.

"What's gone?"

"The irons. Who took 'em off?"

"Easy!" whispered Old Deadsure, darting the Westerner a look of warning. "Don't talk too much."

Despite his dazed condition, the man from the West was quick to understand, and his lips were sealed after that. In a short time, he was able to get up and walk out of the drug store.

A crowd had collected, and a policeman pushed forward and demanded to know the full particulars.

"It's all roight, sur," assured Deadsure, speaking with a brogue that matched well with his disguise. "It's me fri'nd here did

be afther taking a drap too mooch av something thot knocked him over shtiff. He do be all roight now."

"Well, I dunno 'bout that," growled the officer, who happened to be in an ugly mood. "You're both suspicious characters."

"G'wan wid yez!" retorted Manton, quickly. "It's no more suspicious we be than yezsilt, sur. We're gintlemin, Oi'd hev yez know."

"Well, I think I'll run you in, just for luck."

"I'll bet yez two ter wan ye don't, me gallus b'y."

"What!" howled the cop, his ire rising swiftly. "Do you dare give any gulf to me? I'll beat the mug off you!" He swung his club ominously.

"It's yer own b'ate ye'd better be afther, sur," snapped Manton, who enjoyed the bit of bluff. "As fur me mug, it's the fayther av yez had wan wid th' map av Killarney on it, fer he was a full-blooded Oirishman, whoile you do be afther degeneration inther a common Yarnkee. Go chase yersilt round th' block!"

That was more than the policeman could stand. In another moment Manton would have felt the heavy club, but he caught a square look into the cop's eyes.

The effect was magical. The policeman hesitated, wavered, gasped and then stood fanning the air with his club, but failing to get within reach of the cool Irishman.

"Whoy don't yez thump me, av you be goin' ter, mon?" asked Old Burke tantalizingly.

"I can't!" gurgled the officer. "My—my feet—they won't move!"

"Oi hiv noticed thot throuble wid a great miny New York policemen whin they wur raded at some point av danger," grinned the detective.

The crowd was amazed, and they fell to laughing at the cop, which added to his rage.

"Oi tell yez what ye'd better do," Manton went on. "Shtand there about tin minutes fannin' yersilt wid yer own club, and thin go roond bark av th' block an' kick yersilt in th' spoine. Good-noight."

The detective and the Westerner walked away, leaving a laughing and mocking crowd about the officer, who was busy fanning himself with his club, according to instructions.

They had not gone far before Buckskin Dick said:

"By that trick I know you. There is only one man in all the world who could have done it so slickly, and that man is Old Deadsure."

"Old Deadsure I am," acknowledged Manton.

"Then be good enough to explain a few things for my benefit," urged Dick. "Tell me how I came to be in that drug store."

"I carried you there."

"Where did you carry me from?"

"A dark side street, where I found you."

"Where you found me—how?"

"Apparently dead drunk on the stones."

"The Dutch?"

"Straight, man. Now, I want you to tell me how you came to be there."

Dick was silent for a moment, and then he answered:

"The gang must have carried me there."

"The gang?"

"Yes. I have been a prisoner in the hands of an infernal band of desperadoes. They were afraid of me, or their Queen was, for I was ironed. The last I knew, I was a captive in their den."

"Then you were recaptured after your attempt to escape?"

"You know of that attempt? Then Evan Rodman—"

"Got away all right."

"And Miss Van Dyke?"

"Yes. She is safe in her father's home."

Dick drew a breath of relief.

"Then I blocked the passage long enough for them to get a good start," he said, with satisfaction. "If Evan has told you all, you know I halted to hold back the cusses."

"A bold and noble action."

"Hush! The boys kept me from running very fast, and so I reckoned I might as well fight. Well, pard, I did give these underground devils a rough muscle, but they knocked me over and thrumped me back after

a time. I got such a tunk on the head that I didn't know my own name for a while. I didn't expect I'd ever get out after that. When I got hungry some food was set in for me. I ate and drank, and I don't remember anything more till I woke up in that drug store."

"The food was drugged."

"Evidently."

"Then the gang dragged you into the street and left you."

"That's what they did; but I am free to confess I do not understand it, pard. They are a crowd who must be right handy at cutting a throat, and just why they should set me adrift is more than I get over."

Old Deadsure was not a little puzzled himself, but he fancied the Snake Gang had a good reason for not wiping Buckskin Dick out.

He was right.

When the two men parted, an appointment for a future meeting had been made.

Midnight found Old Burke in a low East Side dive. He had been making the rounds of such resorts, hoping to strike something that would assist him in his search for the vanished Smith. The place into which he had finally strayed bore a very bad reputation. It was patronized by all classes and both sexes, and was a disgrace to the city.

Manton sat at a corner table, having a glass of beer in front of him. His position enabled him to survey the entire room.

At the nearest table were two tough-looking customers who were talking in low tones, their heads being close together.

Just beyond them was a little rounded Italian, who was idly drumming on his teeth with something that looked like a lead pencil.

At first, Deadsure did not notice this drumming, but his attention was finally attracted to it, and, to his astonishment, he realized the Italian was imitating the sound of a clicking telegraph instrument. Not only that, but he was spelling out the detective's name!

CHAPTER XXIII.

ELEGANT ELL ENTRANCED.

"B-U-R-K-E—B-U-R-K-E—B-U-R-K-E."

There was no mistaking the call. The Deadsure Detective was an expert telegraph operator and could read the swiftest message by ear.

He immediately slipped a round piece of metal into his mouth, permitting it to rest upon his tongue so it would click against his teeth. Then, with a skill that was wonderful, he rattled:

"All right; listening."

To his consternation, the two men between him and the Italian looked up suspiciously, and one who wore a lop-brimmed hat said:

"What ther blazes is all that clickin' business?"

The Italian lay back in his chair, as if utterly unconscious of his surroundings, still drumming on his teeth with the pencil. The two toughs looked at him sharply, but he did not appear to know they were in the vicinity. All the while, he was thumping out as follows:

"Danger! Cadger Jim is here."

Manton did not venture to click a reply, for he saw one of the men at the intervening table surveying him from the corner of his eyes.

"Dern a Dago!" growled the lop-brim. "What's an Eycetalian want of a lead pencil, anyhow?"

"He swiped it, likely. Never mind him. As I was sayin'—"

Again their voices fell.

"The Cadger has taken an oath to wipe you out," telegraphed the Italian.

Manton slipped the piece of metal from his mouth and faced the other squarely, pushing back his hat, so the light would fall full on his face. At a signal, the Italian turned slowly about so he could see the detective.

Then, with the swiftness of a skilled operator, Old Burke asked this question:

"What is he?"

With his excellent Deadsure made the dots and dashes of the Morse alphabet, and thus he telegraphed in utter silence, yet every letter was read by the men for whom they were intended.

Such a method of communication was handy, to say the very least.

The pencil of the Italian replied:

"In the back room with pals."

"Have you spotted Smith or Ell?" asked Manton.

"Ell is sitting between us. Thought you knew and was piping him."

The detective did not show his surprise, but he surveyed the two men near at hand. He quickly discovered the erstwhile elegant sport was the tough-looking wearer of the lop-brimmed hat.

The Prince of Crooks had resorted to a disguise that must be anything but pleasant for his delicate and artistic feelings, as he was said to be a man who had a horror of anything but the most fashionable apparel.

"What's he in that rig for?" winked Manton.

"Thinks you are after him," was the reply.

"Has he spotted my shape?"

"Think not."

The detective was pleased with this reply, for it showed him his disguise was good, even though his assistant had penetrated it, for the Italian was Dare, the spy.

Elegant Ell was said to be remarkably keen at seeing through disguises. True, he had not given much attention to Old Deadsure, but he had glanced toward the detective.

And now Manton took a casual survey of the companion of the disguised crook. He soon discovered the fellow was known to him, although he had been regarded merely as a suspect by the police, having avoided arrest up to date.

That the two men were discussing something of deep interest to them, was evident by their earnest manner, and that it was a strictly private matter, was shown from the way they lowered their voices and held their heads together.

Manton and Dare came to a perfect understanding by means of their queer method of telegraphy.

Barely was this over when Elegant Ell's companion arose and hurried away, leaving the Prince of Crooks alone.

A sudden resolve seized upon Old Deadsure, and he laughed softly at the idea.

Evidently the disguised crook had determined to carry out his assumed character of a tough, for he bent a fierce look on Burke.

"What yer laffin' at?" he hoarsely demanded.

As if this had been an invitation, Manton arose and took the seat at the other table.

"It's me thoughts as wuz pl'azin' me, sur," he grinned. "At toimes Oi do be afther gettin' mighty pl'azed at some things Oi think. This happens to be wan av th' toimes."

Ell scowled blackly.

"Well," he said, "you'll git yer mug thumped off if yer set around chucklin' in that fashion."

"Is it thumpin' ye'r' sp'akin' av, Oi dunno? Well, Oi think Oi might be intherested in thot. Oi liv a woay av usin' me fists an' me fate thot is moighty handy."

The disguised crook snarled.

"What do I care fer that! Get out!"

"What?"

"Get out!"

"Divvil a bit! Is it throuble ye'r' lookin' fur? Thin Oi'm yer b'y. It's a good scrap me saoul longs fer!"

Manton smote the table with his clinched hand and seemed on the point of reaching across for Ell.

The Prince of Crooks did not really desire an encounter, but he had thought best to personate the fierce tough which, according to his attire, he appeared.

On the other hand, the detective would have delighted in bringing about an encounter and snatching off Ell's disguise.

But nothing of the kind was to take place. The crook did not desire it, and he seemed on the point of leaving Manton when the latter looked deep into his eyes, exercising the full extent of his remarkable power.

Elegant Ell started and then settled back in his chair, staring wildly and trying to speak.

"Keep still!" sternly commanded Old Burke.

With a smothered groan and a curse, the Prince of rascals sunk limply in his chair.

"Good!" nodded the detective. "You

are now in my power; you must do exactly as I command. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

The reply was made in a mechanical fashion.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Old Deadsure."

"That is right. Do you know Cadger Jim?"

"Yes."

"Is he one of your tools?"

"He has done work for me."

"Where is he?"

"In the back room."

"Is he laying for me?"

"Not to-night. Didn't expect you here."

"But he means to throw me?"

"He does."

"For what?"

"You turned him and Slinky to the cops."

"When?"

"On Broadway some nights ago."

"So that is the job he is sore about?"

"Yes."

"Do you know a man by the name of Smith?"

"I know several."

"But one particular man—a certain John Smith?"

"I know four John Smiths."

"Do you have dealings with them all?"

"No."

"With one of them?"

"With one who sometimes calls himself John Smith."

"That's the one I mean. Where is he?"

"Where he won't bother me."

"Where is that?"

"The Clan Gang have him."

This was interesting to Manton.

"Is he their captive?"

"He is."

"Why have they captured him?"

"The Queen ordered it."

"Then she has sole power over the Clan?"

"No."

"Who else?"

"The chief."

"The chief has a greater power than hers?"

"He does."

"Who is the chief?"

Ell hesitated and seemed struggling to overcome the power that compelled him to answer these questions, but Manton gazed steadily into the crook's eyes, and the effort was useless.

"Who is the chief?" repeated the Deadsure Detective.

"I am?"

Burke was not surprised, for he had expected that answer. He believed his time had come for discovering all the secrets of the Snake Gang. If he were not disturbed, he could soon draw the truth from the entranced rascal's unwilling lips.

At the next table Dare was watching all that took place, although he appeared to be paying more attention to the glass of liquor that sat on the table before him.

At this moment a man darted out of the back room. He had been standing just beyond the open door, where he could survey the interior of the dive.

With two bounds he reached the table at which Ell and Manton were sitting.

"Curse you! take that!" he snarled.

With a gleaming knife he struck straight at the detective's back, intending to bury the blade to the hilt between Deadsure's shoulders.

The watchful Dare saved his master's life.

With a panther-like leap the detective's spy cleared the table at which he was sitting, and planted one of his small, hard fists fairly under the right ear of the would-be assassin.

"Takea dat!" cried the disguised spy, as Cadger Jim measured his length on the hard floor. "Don'ta try sticka da man in da backa when John is rounda!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FEARFUL BATTLE.

THEN there was an uproar.

The Cadger had a hard head, and he was not injured to any great extent by Dare's blow.

Scarcely had Jim measured his length on the floor when he leaped up, howling:

"That Irish fake is Old Deadsure! He's pipin' some of der gang! Down him, boys!"

This commotion had released Elegant Ell from the spell of Manton's power, and he joined his voice in the shout:

"Don't let Burke escape! He's workin' to pull some of the crowd!"

The place was full of crooks and convicts, and every man seemed to consider himself endangered by the presence of the great detective. Not a few of the more timid ones sought safety in flight, but there were some desperate characters who rallied at the call of the Prince of Rascals.

Old Deadsure quickly found himself surrounded by a fierce mob that was athirst for his blood.

He had dumped the table on top of Elegant Ell as he leaped up, and the disguised dandy crook was just scrambling to his feet, fuming with fury.

Cadger Jim knew the Italian must be in league with the detective, so he bellowed:

"Stop the Dago! Down him! Don't let him get away!"

He made a rush for Dare.

The little spy was as nimble as a cat, and he avoided the fierce charge, catching up a chair and beating the Cadger down.

"Don'ta try to monka with me!" he half-laughed. "Bada mana."

But Manton did not attempt to keep up the disguise. Once more Elegant Ell cried:

"Don't let Burke escape! There he is!"

He pointed straight at the detective.

"You are right," came unhesitatingly from Deadsure's lips. "I am Manton Burke!"

With a sweep of his hand, he ripped off the false beard and wig, which he dashed into the eyes of the Prince of Crooks, who was trying to get a grip on the daring officer.

"Come on, you hounds! Walk up, you miserable pups!" he shouted, as, with two terrible blows, he sent a brace of the thugs reeling into the arms of their comrades.

He retreated toward a corner, where none of his enemies could get behind him.

Hump Bodley, who had been in the dive, crouching and dodging between the legs of other men, sought to trip the dauntless detective.

Reaching down, as the talon of a hawk descends on its prey, Old Deadsure grasped the deformed by the neck, snatched him up and shook him in the air as a big mastiff might shake a rat. Then, with an exclamation of disgust, Burke sent the hunchback hurtling through the air into the very midst of the surging throng of desperate thugs.

The body of Hump Bodley, a veritable human projectile, knocked over three or four of the thugs and produced consternation for a moment.

"Hurrah!" yelled Dare, imitating his employer's example in flinging off all disguise. "We're good for this gang!"

The little spy, who had all the delicate manners of a society swell, entered into the spirit of the battle, showing himself no mean antagonist, despite his size. He handled his feet as well as his fists, and he was like a flea in the lively manner he hopped about.

Smack! smack! smack! His hard little fists struck heavily, and every blow counted.

All at once he received a terrible stroke under the ear, and he was hurled at Manton's feet, where he lay inactive and dazed for the time.

The detective stepped across the prostrate body of his faithful assistant, and, with a foot on each side of Dare, continued to beat off his assailants.

Old Deadsure was a wonderful fighter. He had the reputation of knocking out the champion heavyweight pugilist of the country in a street encounter, on which occasion said pugilist had attempted to pumme! a stranger, after his usual brutal fashion.

The crooks were really somewhat afraid of Old Burke, and that gave Manton some advantage for a few moments. But he was so outnumbered it could be no more than a matter of time before they would get the best of him.

The proprietor of the dive was filled with

the police down on him, and he had very nearly lost his license on account of a former affair of the kind. But, for all of his entreaties and his threats, the unequal battle continued.

Elegant Ell urged his men on and took the lead.

That was exactly what Burke was watching for.

When the opportunity came, the detective lurched forward, made a false thrust and then cut under Ell's guard with telling effect.

The Prince was caught fairly on the point of the jaw, and the force of the blow lifted him off his feet and sent him senseless into the arms of a companion.

"Come up, you heathen hounds!" thundered Deadsure, his eyes literally blazing with magnetic fire—"come up and swallow your pills!"

Then he saw the glitter of steel, and he barely had time to squirm aside and escape the lunge that was made straight for his heart.

As it was, his coat was slit for a distance of eight inches.

It was a close call.

Before the desperado with the knife could recover, he felt his wrist caught in a grip of iron.

Exerting all his strength, which was simply wonderful, the now thoroughly aroused detective gave the murderous rascal's arm a twist and a surge.

There was a snap, a shriek, and the unlucky wretch was sent reeling back with a broken wrist!

For one moment, the gang was checked. The detective now looked like a demon of fury, and this amazing act was almost beyond the comprehension of the thugs.

It is possible that, had not an unfortunate thing occurred just then, Manton might by swift assault have put his foes to flight.

There was no hesitation on his part. He was on the point of springing forward when, all at once, Dare uprose.

Old Deadsure was tripped and came near falling.

"Now's the time! Jump the cuss!"

Once more the mob surged forward, and the fight was renewed with redoubled fierceness.

The detective regained his upright posture, hurling back three or four of the toughs who had sprung upon him.

Dare again took a hand, and his temporary disability seemed to have created a perfect tempest of fury in his breast. He struck and kicked, and he could handle his feet with almost as much skill as his hands.

"Give it to 'em, Burke!" he cried. "Don't let this gang of sneaks down you!"

There was no need to urge Manton on, for he was giving it to the ruffians in a fashion they despised.

But it was not to remain a battle of fists and feet, for knives flashed in many a hand.

"Cut their hearts out!" shouted Elegant Ell, who had suddenly recovered. "They must not get out of here! Finish them both!"

"We'll have to use our guns!" exclaimed Dare, as he reached toward his hip-pocket.

"Don't let them shoot!" screamed a voice.

"All together—now! Down they go!"

It was a fearful rush, and it seemed that the two daring fighters must be crushed to the floor and literally cut to pieces by the many knives.

At this moment another individual took a hand in the battle.

"By the eternal snows of Pike's Peak! I'm into this scrimmage bigger'n a wolf! It's a blessed long time since I have had a genuine old time knock-down-and-drag-out jamboree, and the sight of this is enough to fill my soul with joy! Whoop! Here I come a-movin'!"

It was Buckskin Dick.

The Westerner hurled himself into the fray like a cyclone, and the blows delivered from his hard fists sent the ruffianly crew staggering to the right and left.

"Good boy!" almost laughed Old Deadsure. "The three of us are enough for this gang."

"Is that you, pard?" exclaimed the man from the West, in delight. "I swear I didn't know you. Take that, you cuss! I was for

siding with the weak, so I chipped in. How do you like that, you dog-faced sinner?"

Spat! spat! His strong arms worked like piston-rods, and his rugged face literally beamed with the joy of the conflict. He was a man who took delight in such a battle.

The appearance of the Westerner gave Manton and Dare a chance to hurl back their enemies, although the little spy was slightly cut in two places. Manton, with his clothing slit in several places, had not been scratched. His usual remarkable luck stood by him.

Buckskin Dick plowed a pathway through the mob and reached the fighting detectives. Then he wheeled and stood shoulder to shoulder with them.

"This is like old days in the camps!" he cried. "Oh, this relieves my feelings mightily! I'll be good for a week after this!"

"You'll be good for all eternity, curse you!" snarled Elegant Ell, who happened to be near the Westerner.

The Prince of Crooks tried to plant the blade of a knife between Dick's ribs, but the man from Colorado was too swift for anything of that kind.

Smack! Once more the dandy rascal received a terrible blow.

The scene in the dive now defied description. The place was turned into a Babel.

All at once, a shrill voice was heard screaming:

"Cops! cops! They're coming! The whole gang will be pulled sure!"

Then there was a sudden change. The thugs and ruffians made a grand rush for the exits, and they escaped from the place by any means available.

It was remarkable how soon the saloon cleared of the mob of fighting and howling men.

Dare and Buckskin Dick were the only two persons left. They looked at each other inquiringly.

"Where is Burke?" asked the Westerner.

Old Deadsure had vanished with the others.

CHAPTER XXV.

DEEP IN THE NIGHT.

THE police did not come down on the dive, for the proprietor of the place had given a false alarm in order to get rid of the mob.

He knew that was the only way to save his license, as he would surely be "pulled over the rack" if the police should come in on him.

Buckskin Dick and Dare, the spy, lost little time in following the thugs from the place. They did not pause to look around for Old Burke, as they both believed the detective fully able to take care of himself under the circumstances. In all probability, his sudden vanishing was significant.

"He never does anything for nothing," declared Dare. "Every move he makes means something. He is probably attending strictly to business at this moment."

In fact, Manton was shadowing Elegant Ell, who had taken a notion to slip away by himself.

"If I can track this rascal to his hole, it may be a good thing for the city," thought the Deadsure Detective. "He acknowledged himself chief of the Snake Gang, and I would give a little something to know where their new hiding-place can be."

Elegant Ell did not seem to suspect pursuit, but Manton knew the rascal was shrewd, and he took care to do the shadow act with the greatest care.

In a short time they were in the vicinity of the Bowery, and yet the Prince of Crooks had not glanced back once.

Suddenly, he plunged through a dark alley and came out upon a narrow street.

Burke followed, reeling along like a drunken man and muttering to himself.

He kept his eyes on Ell, and saw that worthy vanish into a doorway.

Instantly old Deadsure realized the crook knew he was followed and had taken this method of giving the pursuer the slip.

In all probability, Ell would skip up to the roof, descend by a scuttle and go out the back way, thus reaching another street.

Quick as a flash, Manton slipped through an alley, and he was soon on the street to

which he fancied the crook would make his way.

None too soon.

He saw a familiar figure scudding into the shadows beyond a street light.

With his collar turned up and his hat slouched over his eyes, Old Deadsure followed.

Without doubt, he would have tracked Elegant Ell successfully had not a policeman interfered. The officer had been drinking, and he leaped out upon Manton at the darkest point of the street.

"Looker here!" snarled the cop; "w'otcher sneakin' erlong like that for? I know ye're up to some devilment, an' I'll just run ye in."

"Let up!" commanded Deadsure. "I am Manton Burke."

"W'ot ther blazes do you s'pose I care! Come erlong now, and don't give me any of yer guff! If ye do, I'll brush ye up with me tickler!"

"You fool!" hissed the angry detective. "Let go my collar, or I'll have you 'broke.' You are interfering with my business."

The policeman was just drunk enough to be bull-headed and slow to understand. As a usual thing, the name of Manton Burke was enough to make a New York officer show the utmost courtesy, but this fellow's brains were not in working order just then.

"Then ye wull hev it!" he snarled, as he attempted to strike Manton.

The next instant the policeman must have imagined a cyclone had sauntered along that way. The stick was twisted out of his grip, and the leather strap that held it fast nearly dislocated his wrist. Then he was whirled off his feet, shaken as though a rat in the teeth of a big dog, after which he was pitched headlong through the air, landing on the stones of the street with such force that he was stunned for the instant.

When he recovered, Old Deadsure had vanished.

But the slight delay was enough to give Elegant Ell opportunity to get away, and he improved it.

In vain did Old Burke look for the Prince of Crooks.

At this hour of the night, Evan Rodman was savagely pacing the carpeted floor of his chamber. He could not sleep, and there was a deep scowl on his handsome face. Care and trouble had left marks upon him during the days since the affair at Wolford's.

With each passing day, the young man fancied his situation grew more and more desperate. He felt like a hunted creature, and the thought that he must remain shut up in that house, while many of his former associates were anxious for his arrest filled him with the greatest bitterness.

"It is hellish!" he muttered, smiting his clinched right hand into the open palm of his left hand. "How long is this to continue? I am sick and weary of it! Why doesn't Manton Burke do something? I have placed all my trust in him, but he seems to progress slowly or not at all."

He went to his window and looked out into the night. A cab was rolling over the stones of the avenue and a dark figure lurking on the opposite side of the way. Evan watched the figure some moments and became satisfied it was some person who was keeping surveillance over Jasper Van Dyke's house.

What for?

The answer came instantly.

To see that Evan Rodman did not escape. "Then they know I am here," thought the young man. "They have found it out!"

He drew back from the window, drawing the curtains closely.

"I never did a crooked act in my life," he muttered, again resuming the restless pacing of the floor, "and yet I feel like a thief because I am virtually in hiding. My enemies, whoever they are, must rejoice at the success of their vile plot."

"My only satisfaction is in knowing Nadine—my darling Nadine!—is safe. It is strange what a mingling of emotions I have for her. At times I fancy I love her madly, and then I will be seized with remorse for my treatment of Wilma—sweet little Wilma!"

"I have acted like a dolt!" he burst forth

fiercely. "Perhaps all this trouble is simply punishment for my action toward a true-hearted and trusting girl. Somehow, Nadine begins to seem different than she did at first. Then she appeared so innocent and child-like that I fancied there could be no thought of guile in her heart. But her kisses are full of fire and the touch of her hand burns my flesh. My love for her, I am beginning to see, is different than my fancy for Wilma ever was—it is more fierce, more fitful. Will it last? or will it burn itself out?"

"Oh, but my cousin is a dream of beauty! Is it possible such a girl can be anything but good and true? Possible! Ah! I have not forgotten the Scarlet Woman! She was almost the very image of Nadine, and yet what is she! The thought comes to me like a warning. If one so fair and beautiful can become such a creature of sin, why not another?"

"My head is throbbing as if it will burst—my poor, poor head!"

He dropped into an easy-chair, his face crushed down into his hands and a strange tremor running over his whole body. For a short time he remained thus without moving, but he finally leaped to his feet again.

"It is too late now!" he cried, his eyes blazing. "There can be no turning back! I have chosen my course. Wilma is lost to me forever, and I love Nadine—great Heaven! how I love her! She must and she shall become mine—my very own! Nothing shall keep me from making her my wife! I would choose this course even though I knew it would bring me to the very gates of torture!"

"Evan!"

The door stood open, and a picture of beauty stood framed in the casement.

Nadine was there! She had come cautiously to his door and opened it softly. Her hair was flowing down her back, and a strange light was in her brown eyes. She stretched out her hands to him.

"Nadine!" he whispered hoarsely. "Here?"

"Yes," she replied swiftly. "I came to make sure it was not true. Oh! such a horrible thing! I shudder to think of it!"

He did not understand her. She did not wait for him to speak.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"You had better not," he replied. "You had better not come here. I was just thinking of you."

"I heard you muttering as I paused at the door—I fancied I heard your lips speak my name. I was just about to go quietly away, feeling thankful you were safe, when I heard that. Then a great impulse came over me, and before I knew what I was doing, I had the door open. Oh, Evan! don't drive me away! I have something to tell you—I must come in for a moment!"

Only a moment he hesitated, and then a mighty resolve took possession of him. He would show her how dear she was to him—he would show her how she could trust him.

"Come, cousin," he said. "Being cousins should give us more than conventional liberty, and—"

"Conventionality ruins freedom—ruins life! I know you love me! That is enough!"

She entered and closed the door. Then she would have rushed to his arms, but he placed a chair for her and gravely motioned her to it. She sunk down, pressing her white hands together convulsively, her glorious eyes fixed on his face.

"Oh, it was such a horrible thing!" she murmured.

"What do you speak of?" he asked.

"My dream—that is what brings me here. I could not sleep, Evan."

"Did you dream of me?"

"Yes, yes!"

His blood leaped hotly in his veins, and yet there was a mingling of pain with the pleasure he felt in his heart. For all that she was so near, and that he believed he loved her devotedly, something seemed wrong. For all that it gave him a thrill to know she had dreamed of him, he was uneasy at her presence.

"It was such a sweet dream at first!" her eyelids drooped and a pink flush stole into the marble puffy of her rounded cheek.

That was enough to tell him it had been a dream of love.

Evan drew back; he placed his clinched hands behind him.

"It is pleasant to know you should dream sweet things of me, cousin mine," he said, speaking as steadily as possible. "There was a time when you repulsed me with scorn and apparent contempt, but—"

"It is different now. Then I was involved; now I am free."

He did not understand her, and she did not give him time to speak before she changed the current of her talk.

"All my dreams were not pleasant. At the end I fancied you had been murdered here in your room. Something lured me to the place—I drew back yonder portieres—peered beyond. A dim light fell from the chandelier. And then I saw you stretched on your bed, motionless and so white! I crept forward and touched you. Merciful Heaven! you were dead!"

The narration of the dream affected her greatly. A look of horror was on her beautiful face, and she trembled violently.

Evan longed to take her in his arms and quiet her, but, with a will of iron, he held himself aloof.

"Don't speak of it, dear cousin!" he entreated. "If it affects you so, do not recall the dream."

"I must—I must! That is what led me here. That dream was a warning—I know it! Oh, how full of joy was my heart when I heard your voice as I stood listening at the door, for then I knew you still lived. In the dream I heard a voice tell me you had been murdered. Oh! Evan! you have an enemy! You must be so careful, for if anything should happen to you, I—I—"

She paused, shuddering and covering her face with her hands.

Before he knew what he was doing, he had reached her and was passionately kissing those hands. In another instant, both her round arms were about his neck, her lips were kissing him again and again, while she murmured a thousand endearing words.

The situation had been unsought by Evan: it had almost been thrust upon him. For some moments he gave himself over to the rapture of his great love for the beautiful girl, and his blood poured in fiery torrents through his veins.

All at once, he realized the situation, and then he sought to gently remove her clinging arms from his neck and arise from his knees.

But Nadine seemed reluctant to unloose her hold. She clung to him and her breath was on his cheek and his lips.

"Nadine, Nadine darling! I love you—I love you with all my heart and soul! I mean to make you my wife, if you will have me. But for all of my love, I am not a man of ice!"

She did not understand, or, if she understood, she did not heed. He was compelled to use great strength in breaking her clasp, and then, with both her hands grasped in his own, he looked deep into her passionate eyes.

"I know you love me, darling—I know it!" he exclaimed, in delight.

"Yes," she breathed, with her flushed face drawing closer to his, "I love you! I love you!"

"And you will be my wife—my own little queen of a wife?"

"Perhaps."

That word struck a dart of pain and amazement to his heart's core.

"Perhaps!" he echoed, astounded. "I do not understand that. If you love me—truly love me—there can be no hesitation on your part—you must be ready to marry me—as ready as I am to make you mine."

She lowered her face until he could not look into those glorious eyes.

"A girl does not always marry the man she loves best," she said.

CHAPTER XXVI.

LOVE OR HATRED.

THOSE words were simple enough in themselves, but they seemed to carry an undercurrent of meaning. Something like a look of horror crossed his face, but her eyes were drooping and she did not see his emotion. It was but a moment, however, when his words aroused her.

"I am certain I do not quite grasp your meaning," he said, and his voice was filled with a sudden chill.

She started, looked up, dropped her eyes again.

"How can I make my meaning plainer?" she murmured, apparently in distress.

Evan Rodman had seen enough of the world to understand both men and women pretty thoroughly, but he was not ready to believe she had intended what her lips seemed to imply. And still, her manner, her trembling voice, her blushing cheeks and drooping eyes stirred his very soul.

In one mad moment he caught her in his arms, crushed her to his heart, rained kisses on her moist, red lips.

She lay unresisting.

The next instant he had flung her from him with a fierceness that was positively rude. He was on his feet, and he retreated behind a chair, trembling from head to feet.

"Nadine," he exclaimed, "I love you far too well to have you remain here longer. But, before you go, I wish you would make it plain just what you meant by your words a few moments ago."

She was on her feet, also.

"Love me!" she cried, in vexation. "You do not love me at all! I believe you hate me!"

"How can you say that?"

"Because I really believe it. If you did not hate me, you would not use me so rudely!"

"If I have been rude in any way, and I fear I have, I humbly crave a thousand pardons. If you think I can hate you, it is because of your youth and innocence. God forbid that I should rob you by opening your eyes in the least. Were you not innocent and trusting as a child, you would not have come here to-night. Did I not love you with all my soul, I might not have the power to control myself as I do."

"But tell me, little one, what did you mean by saying a girl does not always marry the man she loves best?"

"Can my meaning be in doubt? Very often they are not allowed to marry the one they love best."

"And you fear such a thing may happen in our case?"

"Why not? Papa is so strange—he objects to our love, for he says cousins should never marry."

"When he understands how sincerely and truly we love each other, he will cease to object."

"Ah! I fear not."

"But, it must be so! The whole world shall not keep us apart."

"What stands between us now?"

Again there seemed a hidden meaning in her words; again her brown eyes were concealed by the drooping lashes, while the crimson color suffused her cheeks.

Evan Rodman slowly became pale and rigid. He stood straight in his tracks, as if turned to stone.

She looked up at length, and saw him thus. A little cry escaped her lips, as she fell back a step.

"Nadine," he said, slowly and distinctly, "I must believe you do not understand the apparent import of your words. It is true, perhaps, that my own will stands between us, but, as I have tried to make plain, it is because I love you so much. You ought not to have come here at this hour, for—"

She made an appealing gesture.

"Don't lecture me!" was her entreaty. "The dream dragged me here, my love would not let me depart without seeing you."

"I believe you, cousin, and—"

"Don't call me 'cousin!' I hate it! If you love me, call me some endearing name!"

Of a sudden, she glided toward him.

"Stop!" came hoarsely from his lips.

"Have a care, Nadine! I will see you anywhere and any time to-morrow. If you know what is best, go to your room now. You are sure I am safe, and so you need worry no more this night."

"I shall not sleep."

"Nor I. Sleep! Great Heaven! Such a thing is impossible with this tumult in my soul! All the remaining hours of the night I shall pace this room and think of you, my darling!"

With a little cry, she flew to him.

"Let me stay!" she entreated. "We can sit near together, hand in hand, and plan for the future. Don't drive me away!"

He caught her hands and held them from his neck. For one moment, the temptation seemed too much to resist; and then he firmly shook his head.

"No; you must go now. Do not be angry, little one; to-morrow you will thank me for sending you away."

She no longer entreated. For one brief instant she flashed him a look that was full of resentment, and then she permitted him to lead her to the door.

"When I have cleared this stain from my name I will be ready to claim you," he said. "Till then, I have no right to do so. That you love me even though such a stigma has been placed upon me, is enough to make me brave and strong."

She did not speak. Her head was drooping and he fancied she was on the verge of tears. Fortunate it was she did not weep, for he must have consoled her, and then the situation would have become strained again.

He pressed her hand, but no responsive pressure answered him. A little time ago that hand had been warm with life, but now the touch sent a chill through his blood.

"You are not ill, Nadine?" he anxiously asked.

She only shook her head.

"But something is the matter with you! You are so silent—so frigid!"

Still she was silent.

"How have I offended you? Heaven knows I have treated you with the respect of a man who worships you!"

"I am not offended."

Her voice was very steady and cold. He did not feel satisfied at all.

"Tell me you will marry me when I have cleared the stain from my name and I will believe you," he urged.

"I will make no promises to-night," was her calm assertion. "I will not trouble you longer. Good-night."

With a frigid little bow, she swiftly opened the door and departed. She was gone before he realized it, and he stood there with the open door and the darkness of the hall before him, a dazed look on his face. He heard her footsteps growing fainter and fainter in the distance, and then the door of her room softly closed, telling him she was in her own apartment.

Then, all at once, he was seized by a great longing to call her back. It was too late.

After a few seconds, he closed the door and staggered to a couch, on which he flung himself, crying brokenly:

"How I love her! how I love her!"

In her room, Nadine turned up the gas and surveyed her own reflection in the great mirror that reached from the floor to the ceiling, a cynical smile on her fair face.

"Am I not beautiful enough to please?" she muttered. "I am sure I never looked better than I do this night. And yet—"

The rest of the sentence was not spoken aloud, but her face expressed the bitterest chagrin.

After a while, she spoke again.

"What fools some men are!" she observed, scornfully. "How I hate him! how I hate him!"

Ten minutes later she was sleeping peacefully in her snowy bed.

In his room, Evan Rodman paced up and down like a caged tiger until the light of day crept grayly through the lace curtains of his window.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MANTON EXPOSES THE TRICK.

MANTON BURKE rung the bell at the door of Jasper Van Dyke's Fifth avenue home and was promptly admitted by the servant.

"Is Mr. Van Dyke in?" asked the detective.

"He is."

"Tell him I have called."

In a few moments the two men were together in the parlor. It is not necessary to relate all that passed between them, but when Van Dyke left that room, he was under the spell of Old Burke's wonderful power.

Dare had rightly said Old Deadsure never did anything without an object, and he had an object in calling there that day. He

could not get into the house without raising suspicion unless he called to see some one, and so it was old Jasper he met in the parlor. In order to get rid of the old man, he sent him away in a trance that would surely last an hour.

"Now," muttered the detective, "it is time for Buckskin Dick to put in an appearance. I am bound to get a sight at Miss Nadine by some means."

He retired behind some heavy *portieres* just as he heard the distant tinkle of the door-bell.

In a few moments, the Westerner was shown into the parlor by the servant.

Buckskin Dick had secured some cards on which "Richard Cutting, Denver, Col.," was neatly engraved, and he sent one of these up to Nadine.

"Are you there, Burke?" softly asked the man from the West, when the servant had disappeared.

"I am here," replied the detective.

"I do not believe she will come down," declared Dick.

"Why not?"

"Well, something makes me think so."

"On the other hand, I am sure she will. If it is all right, she will be only too glad to see you and thank you for what you did for her, regardless of the fact that you once mistook her for another person who is her almost perfect double."

"We will know in a few moments."

It was not long before the servant reappeared and announced that Miss Van Dyke would come down without delay.

"You were right," confessed Dick, when the servant had vanished. "You know more about human nature than I."

In less than ten minutes Nadine appeared. Never did she look more bewilderingly beautiful than at that moment, attired as she was in an afternoon house-dress that was one of Worth's most happy creations.

Buckskin Dick bowed with the grace and ease of a society gentleman, and Nadine received him politely.

"I have a great deal to thank you for, sir," she declared, before he could speak.

"And I have a most humble apology to tender," he immediately responded.

"Never mind the apology. You showed yourself a true and noble gentleman. Can I ever forget that night of horror? But for you, we might have been recaptured by those ruffians. You—"

"Did what any man with blood in his veins would have done. I was only too happy to defend a lady, and especially one whom I had offended by false accusations. I did not know as you would receive me to-day."

"Oh, I hope you did not think me so unthankful as that! Had I declined to see you, I should have reproached myself forever. I am not like the conventional society girl of New York, for which I am sincerely thankful."

Buckskin Dick bit his lip. His soul was filled with commotion; again was he stirred with doubts. Could it be possible this girl was not the one he had called his wife? She was surely the very counterpart of his lost Lucy. Had he not seen them both in the retreat of the Snake Gang he could not have believed two such women existed.

"I know of what you are thinking," she declared, "and I admit it is wonderful. Never before did I dream I had a double in the world, but when I saw her stand before me I was struck dumb with amazement. And to think she is such a wicked creature!"

"I once thought her pure and innocent as the stars," asserted the man from the West, his voice a trifle hoarse. "She seemed like a trusting child."

"And you married her?"

"Yes."

"You did not live happily together?"

"We did."

"I don't know as I understand. Did she prove false to you?"

"She deceived me."

"It is terrible! I have read of such things in newspapers; but papa does not like to have me read the papers very much."

"Perhaps we had better not speak of that unpleasant affair then. I beg your pardon for mentioning it."

"Oh, but you did not mention it; I was

the one. Of course, after what occurred here the first day I saw you, I understand the situation pretty well."

"I fear not, Miss Van Dyke; you fancied me a blackmailer."

She was plainly confused.

"I must confess it did seem like it."

"I do not wonder it seemed so."

"Well, the understanding is perfect now. If Cousin Evan were here, he would add his thanks to mine."

"I am here."

Evan Rodman stepped into the room and grasped Buckskin Dick's hand.

"My dear sir," the young man cried, "I knew not as we would ever look on your face again. How did you escape those wretches?"

Nadine started as if she had forgotten something.

"Yes," she put in, with eagerness, "tell us how you escaped."

The man from Colorado looked at her keenly, but naught except eagerness to learn the truth of his escape was written on her fresh fair face.

Briefly, Dick told his story. There was nothing very wonderful about it, and still it seemed strange that he was drugged and released in such a manner.

Behind the *portieres*, from which retreat he shyly peered, Manton Burke was eagerly watching and listening to all that passed. Strange thoughts were flitting through his head, and he was preparing to spring an astounding surprise on those gathered in the parlor.

"Those villains must be brought to justice!" cried Evan, when he had listened to Dick's story. "Even Manton Burke, shrewd though he is, does not seem able to cope with them."

"The shrewdest detectives must have time," asserted Buckskin Dick.

A sudden cold look came to Nadine's face.

"He has had time enough," she asserted. "I do not believe he is very smart."

The *portieres* were flung apart and Old Deadsure strode out into the room, his magnetic eyes fixed accusingly on the girl, who quailed and cried out in terror. Lifting one hand, he pointed a finger straight at her, saying sternly:

"Manton Burke is smart enough to expose your little game, my young and charming adventuress!"

For one instant after this there was dead silence in that parlor. Nadine turned deathly white, and a cloud of midnight blackness gathered on Evan Rodman's face.

With one sweeping stride, the young man placed himself before the detective.

"Sir," he sternly spoke, "you are insolent! I know not why you were hiding behind those curtains—"

"Then I will tell you," cut in Old Deadsure. "I was concealed there in order to get a square look at this woman, who would have declined to meet me otherwise."

"The act was that of a sneak!" cried Evan, his hot blood gaining the mastery. "Your words were those of a boaster! Take them back—apologize, or by the eternal gods! I will leave the mark of my fist on your face!"

Old Burke smiled, but oh! what a strange smile it was!

"You are talking fast, Mr. Rodman," he calmly said. "You will not strike me, and I shall not apologize. Stop!"

He was looking Evan squarely in the eyes, and the young man's half lifted fist dropped at his side.

"I know what I am about," Manton went on, easily. "I made no error when I designated this woman as an adventuress."

"She is my cousin!"

"About as much as I am—no more!"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't believe him!" cried the girl, in terror. "He lies! he lies!"

Buckskin Dick was filled with amazement, as he had not fully fathomed the detective's scheme in hiding behind the *portieres*. Now, he listened with hushed breath for the revelation he felt sure was coming.

"If you have a cousin," said Old Burke, "be sure this is not she. There is another woman who looks exactly like this cousin of yours. I have been led to understand?"

"Yes."

"There she stands!"

Once more his finger was pointed accusingly at the girl.

"It is false!" she screamed.

"It is impossible!" cried Evan.

Buckskin Dick could not utter a word.

"You have been tricked," the Deadsure Detective continued. "Can't you see how the game was worked?"

Here the woman interrupted him, but he silenced her, going on.

"What could be easier? Nadine Van Dyke being the captive of the Scarlet Woman was forced to surrender her clothes to the creature so much like her. Then this Queen of Crooks, attired like the captive, comes panting to the door of your cell and tells a very slick story about her escape from the drunken keeper. Her acting is perfect, and, as she is so much like the real Nadine, you are easily deceived. The whole business of the escape was carefully planned and carried out. Nadine is still a captive in the power of the Snake Gang! Nadine's double is here!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CRY IN THE DARK.

ASTOUNDING was the detective's exposure of the trick. Evan Rodman was struck motionless with horror, and Buckskin Dick seemed like one paralyzed.

Could such a thing be possible?

They looked at the beautiful woman who had been thus accused, and the question was answered.

Despair, fury and dismay were written on her face. Her brown eyes were literally blazing as she glared at Old Deadsure, who had thus betrayed her game. Her shapely white hands were clinched and her queenly head thrown back.

"Good Heavens!" cried Evan Rodman. "It is impossible! Nadine—if you are Nadine—say it is false—say this detective is wrong!"

She smiled—oh, what a smile it was! Before she could speak, the man from the West burst out.

"It is true! Read the confession on her false face! This is the woman who deceived me!"

Then she laughed!

"Yes," she confirmed, "I am that woman!"

That was enough. Evan Rodman uttered a groan of dismay. Before one of the three men could make a move, the woman started toward the door.

"Stop her!"

Like a leaping tiger, Old Deadsure placed himself between the woman and the door, in which, at that very moment, Jasper Van Dyke appeared.

"Nothing can stop me!" she hissed.

A revolver appeared in her hand!

Crack! There was a flash, a report, two cries, two heavy falls!

Through the puff of smoke leaped the desperate woman, springing over the prostrate form of the detective, but pausing an instant at the door to look down at the pallid, upturned face of old Jasper.

The old man saw her. He was pressing his hand to his breast.

"You have killed me!" he moaned.

Shrieking with sudden horror, she vanished from view.

Old Burke suddenly sat up, his countenance blanched, but a resolute look in his eyes.

"Don't let her escape!" he cried.

"You are wounded!" exclaimed Buckskin Dick.

"Never mind me! Stop that woman! She must not get away!"

Rodman was kneeling over the body of his uncle.

"I am killed!" the old man whispered. "My will! Part of it must be altered! She is given one-half my possessions; but she must not have one cent!"

The servants, white-faced and frightened, came crowding to the door.

The confusion of the moment gave the desperate adventuress time to obtain a start; but Burke was soon on his feet and after her.

"She must be stopped!" he grated. "If she is given a show, she will get away."

Buckskin Dick was at his heels.

The servants were so confused they could not tell which way the woman had gone.

"Look out that she does not get out of the house!" cried Burke, as he hurried up the stairs. "She has gone to her room, I think."

For once, he was wrong. Knowing the house thoroughly and realizing the peril of her position, the adventuress darted down the stairs to the basement, encountering no one, fortunately for her. Without a second's delay, she tore open the basement door and sprung up the stone steps.

A cab was standing in front of the house. Like a flash, she thrust a ten-dollar bill into the driver's hand, crying:

"Quick—to the Grand Central Depot! I must catch a train!"

He looked at her in amazement, for she was not attired for the street.

"Don't stop to stare! Drive! drive! drive!"

The door slammed, the driver cut his horses with the whip, away dashed the cab.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the desperate woman. "Let them catch me now!"

When the Grand Central Station was reached, she left the cab, which promptly departed. Immediately she entered another closed carriage, and directed the driver to take her down-town to a certain destination.

It was a simple but shrewd trick to balk pursuit for a time. It would appear she had dashed to the Grand Central and taken a train for other parts. Although it would be an easy thing to discover the falseness of this supposition, her shift from one cab to another would be a bit baffling, and by the time the trail was taken up again, she would have covered her tracks completely.

It did not take Manton Burke long to discover the woman had escaped from the house, but he knew how swiftly she would fly, and he felt that the slight delay had given her a great advantage. But, more aggravating than anything else was the fact that he had been wounded, and was losing blood. He knew not how severe his injury was, and so it was necessary to have it looked after at once.

One of the servants had been dispatched for Jasper Van Dyke's physician, and the old man was placed on a soft bed. Evan remained at his uncle's side, his heart full of horror and anxiety.

Old Burke calmly took off his coat and vest, and then cut away the shirt until he could examine his own injury.

"Not more than a scratch," he smiled; "though it did seem to take the strength out of me for the moment. The ball has raked a slight furrow along my side here, and I am bleeding as if I were butchered. As soon as the flow of blood can be checked, I shall be ready for business."

One of the servants had sent in an ambulance call, and the surgeon arrived at the same moment Jasper Van Dyke's physician appeared. The two made a hasty examination of the old man, and then, while one was probing for the bullet, the other attended to Old Deadsure's injury.

"The bullet struck a rib," was declared. "That is why it robbed you of strength for a moment. It was a glancing shot, anyway, which is lucky for you."

It was but a short time before the detective was ready to don his coat and vest again. The surgeon advised him to keep quiet for a day or two, but Manton smiled and shook his head.

"That is impossible," he said. "I shall have a raft of business requiring my attention the next two days. A scratch like this cannot stop me."

He was soon tracking the escaped adventuress.

But the woman who had been shrewd and desperate enough to perform the acts already recorded was keen enough to cover her tracks. Manton followed her to the Grand Central Station, and from there he trailed her down-town. But, after she left the second cab at Tompkins Square, she succeeded in covering the scent.

It was near the hour of lighting the street lamps when Old Deadsure returned to Jasper Van Dyke's mansion. He was told the old man had fallen into a sort of stupor from which he might not recover, as the wound was pretty sure to prove fatal.

Evan was there, and the young man's face was clouded with sadness.

"What news?" he asked.

"None yet," was the reply. "The woman has not escaped from the city, and the police are on the watch for her."

"This is awful!" groaned the young man. "To think I took that wicked adventuress for my innocent and trusting cousin!"

The memory of what had occurred the previous night haunted him, and it now seemed he should have known the woman who came to his room was not the modest and gentle Nadine. And still, he wondered at her apparent modesty—at her blushes which she had summoned so readily to her cheeks.

But, the thought that filled him with the greatest agony was that Nadine remained a captive in the hands of the adventuress's willing tools.

"She is the most dangerous and skillful female crook I ever run up against," confessed Manton Burke. "But, this mad act of hers will surely prove her ruin, even though she gave us the slip as she did. The murder of Jasper Van Dyke will arouse all New York."

"Then you think there is no chance for my uncle?"

"He is an old man."

"And the wound is severe."

"Just so."

"No time must be lost in securing this woman!"

"You are right; but she is probably in her retreat at this moment. If you knew where to find that place—"

"I believe I know very nearly. I have been thinking of that, and the more I thought the more it seemed as if I could go to the very spot."

"If you were not mistaken—"

"We will know without delay."

"What do you mean?"

"I am going there now."

"But night has come on."

"That makes no difference. There will be hours of darkness. If we wait till morning, it may be too late. I am going out immediately and search for the hiding-place of the Snake Gang!"

Evan's face was flaming with excitement and he was in deadly earnest.

Manton saw it would be useless to attempt to dissuade the hot-blooded young man, even though he doubted that anything could be done toward finding the retreat of the Clan that night.

Within ten minutes, Evan was ready to leave the house.

"Let's go out by the way," he said. "I know the place is watched by reporters and detectives. Possibly we can give them the slip."

So they stole forth by the back way, coming out on a cross street.

A closed carriage took them down on the East side near the spot where Evan was sure the underground passage had come forth beneath a pier.

"Look here," said the detective, "have you an idea where we will obtain a boat?"

Evan was filled with dismay, for he had not thought of that.

"Go into that old building and wait for me," said Burke, pointing to a rattletrap structure not far from the nearest wharf. "I will secure a boat in a short time and a search-lantern. That old hulk is open and deserted. It was at one time a hotel and house of bad repute. If it is not torn down soon, it will fall down."

A few more words passed between them, and the detective hurried away.

Evan regarded the dark hulk of the decaying hotel. The moon came through a rift in the clouds and gave him a better view of the wretched building.

"It doesn't look very inviting," he muttered. "Any amount of thugs might hide around that old ranch. I do not fancy going in there."

The clouds shut out the moon once more, and then the young man went over in the shadows of the deserted hotel.

He had not stood there long when he heard footsteps approaching.

He drew close to the wall, thrusting his hand into a pocket where reposed a ready revolver.

There was a mumbling of voices, but he did not catch the words which were spoken.

Then, all of a sudden, two dark figures came around the corner of the old hotel.

Evan could see them plainly, and he pressed himself back against the dark wall, so he might not be detected.

The hazy light which sifted through the clouds showed him one of the men was carrying a huge bundle that was flung across his shoulder.

That the night prowlers were not up to any honest work was betrayed by the fact that they spoke in guarded tones, as if afraid of being overheard.

The one with the bundle was following close at the heels of the other.

The door of the old hotel was closed, but the leader pushed it open, showing it had not been fastened, and then the two men filed into the building.

The door was closed.

Just as the second man was passing in, the moon threatened to break entirely through the clouds. The additional light afforded Evan Rodman a better view of the bundle carried by the fellow.

The young man started, a suspicion flashing over him.

The bundle looked strangely like a muffled human figure!

"Heavens!" gasped Evan. "Is it possible those men are kidnappers or body-snatchers? What was that object they carried? I would give something to know!"

That was enough. His curiosity was aroused.

"I'll follow them!"

Drawing the revolver and holding it ready for use, he softly advanced to the door, which he cautiously opened.

It was dark and silent as the grave within.

Not without a feeling of "shakiness," Evan stepped into the old hotel.

With the same caution he had observed in opening the door, he closed it.

But then he could not see a thing. He was in the midst of utter and appalling darkness.

He listened.

For some moments, not a sound came to his ears save the squeaking cry of a rat. Then—

"Help! help! Heaven save me!"

It was a woman's cry!

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE RUINED HOTEL.

AND it fairly rung through the ramshackle building, seeming to start into life a host of echoes.

It cut straight to Evan Rodman's heart.

"Good God! I know that voice!"

The words burst from his lips.

"Help! help! Save me!"

Again the appeal, and there could be no doubting it now. He *did* know the voice.

"It is Wilma!"

Then he heard hoarse words from masculine throats, mingled with the pitiful pleading of the one who had shouted for help.

Grinding his strong white teeth together, the young man rushed forward. In a moment, he found himself at the foot of a flight of stairs, and he discovered the cries came from above. With an answering shout, he sprang upward.

He heard other cries and the sound of running feet.

Almost instantly Evan realized the girl had broken from her captors and was seeking to escape recapture.

When he reached the head of the stairs, the sounds told him which way to move.

He was a little surprised when he found the captive had fled up still another flight of stairs.

The kidnappers were stumbling after her, raving furiously, while she made the old building resound with her appeals for aid.

"Curse her! she will have the whole river front down on us!" Evan heard one of the men shout.

"Not much!" retorted the other. "People around here know enough to keep away from this ranch."

"But somebody is in here; I heard a shout."

"Some of the gang."

"I don't think."

"Anyway, we'll git holt of the gal again."

They made so much noise they did not hear the young man who was close at their heels, and the darkness of the gloomy place fully hid him.

When Evan reached the head of the last flight, a spectacle that stirred his blood was presented to view.

A large hole was broken in the roof of the old hotel, and through this the misty moonlight was streaming. In the moonlight three persons were struggling.

Two of them were the ruffianly night prowlers, while the third was a female.

Without an instant's hesitation, Evan sprang forward to take a hand in the uneven battle. He saw he was right in thinking the voice that of Wilma Wilcox, but he had no time to wonder how she came in such a pitiful plight.

"You dastardly dogs!"

Smack! Evan's hard fist caught one of the kidnappers fairly under the ear, and the ruffian was sent reeling into the shadows.

Wilma cried out to him:

"Oh, Evan! Evan! save me!"

That appeal touched his very heart. In an instant, it seemed that all his once tender love for her came back with a rush, and he was ready to lay down his life to defend her.

"I will!" he cried, in answer.

But, even as the words passed his lips, it seemed that something burst in his brain with a fearful crash. A million bright lights blazed before his eyes—and then came darkness!

Manton Burke did not find Evan Rodman waiting for him. In vain the detective sought for the young man.

"Something has gone wrong," he decided, after he had gone all through the deserted hotel, flashing his search-lantern's light into all the corners of the lonely place. "He is nowhere here, and it does not look as if a person had been around here for months. This would be a good resort for tramps and bums, but they are afraid of the place—say it's haunted. Bosh!"

His uneasiness increased when he thought of the remarkable vanishing of Jasper Van Dyke's nephew. He could not doubt the sincerity of the young man in wishing to institute instant search for the hidden passage of the Snake Gang, and so the disappearance assumed a mysterious aspect.

"Can anything have happened to him?"

After a time, he decided it appeared that way. Then he longed to have Dare at hand.

Old Deadsure lingered about the deserted hotel for more than two hours, but he saw no living thing anywhere in the vicinity. Out on the river the ferryboats lumbered up and down, carrying their colored lights, and across the spider span of the Brooklyn Bridge the regular trains crept to and fro. Manton realized he was in a quarter of the city that is most deserted and lonely after nightfall. Dark crimes have been committed there in those grim and solitary streets, and the quarter is marked by the police as "dangerous."

At length, Manton hurried away. He was fortunate in finding his assistant within half-an-hour.

"I have some work for you, Dare," he said.

"That is good," retorted the ready spy.

"You may not like it so very well; it is not a society job. Instead of that, it is located down by the river in a pretty bad quarter."

"Business is business," was Dare's laconic retort; and he was ready to accompany Manton.

The veteran detective told his assistant the story of the things he had witnessed and of Evan Rodman's remarkable vanishing.

"What do you suspect?" questioned the spy.

"I know not exactly what to suspect, but, as he was near that old deserted hotel when I last saw him, I fancied the place might be shadowed with profit."

The little assistant nodded.

"It seems that way."

Down to the water front went Manton once more, and Dare was with him. He placed the spy where he could see any one who entered and left the old building by the regular doors, cautioned him to keep wide awake, and then left him there.

As Manton was making his way up Third avenue he discovered he was being followed.

The impression came over him slowly, and he finally knew without once turning his head that there was a tracker not far behind.

The Dead Sure Detective had been dogged too many times to be startled by such a discovery. Instead, he calmly considered what was the best course to pursue.

He soon decided.

Coming to an all-night saloon, he sauntered carelessly in and leaned against the bar, behind which a red-headed man was catching cat-naps.

"Let me have some seltzer," said Manton, speaking loud enough to arouse the drowsing bartender, who promptly responded:

"Bless my bloomin' cyes! I was snoozin'. Watcher want?"

"Seltzer."

The red-head looked at Manton queerly, and gave a sniff, as if he were disgusted at the thought of any man drinking seltzer at that time in the morning; but he promptly filled a glass from a bottle.

The detective flung out a silver dollar, and the bartender rung in five cents, turning his back to the bar, having a little trouble in finding the ready change.

As he lifted the glass of seltzer to his lips, Old Deadsure looked into the glass behind the bar. The mirror showed him the villainous face of Slinky Mike, who was creeping swiftly but silently up behind Manton.

A knife glittered in the crook's fingers!

CHAPTER XXX.

BURKE EXERCISES HIS MARVELOUS POWER.

OLD DEADSURE instantly realized the desperate and deadly intent of the ruffian.

Slinky Mike was seeking to stab the detective in the back.

Still Manton did not whirl about.

It happened that, at that very instant, Mike lifted his eyes enough to look into the mirror beyond the bar, and he saw that Old Burke was aware of his presence.

Then a wonderful thing happened.

Slinky Mike looked at the reflected eyes of the magnetic man-hunter, and something seemed to chain the murderous ruffian to the spot.

Manton had cast a spell over the would-be assassin without turning to face him—had hypnotized Mike by means of the mirror!

The barkeeper turned back to give Old Deadsure his change, and he uttered a cry of astonishment and alarm when he saw the thug standing rigidly just behind Manton's back, a knife gripped in his half-uplifted hand.

"Look out!"

The man behind the bar uttered the cry.

"What's the matter?" coolly asked Burke.

"Matter?" spluttered the bartender. "Look behind you! Quick! A bloke is goin' to stick ye!"

"Oh, I guess not," smiled the detective, as he calmly sipped his seltzer. "He's perfectly harmless. That's only a way he has."

The barkeeper gasped for breath.

"Well, it's a bloomin' dirty way!" he declared. "I don't want no cove flourishin' a sticker behind my back, you bet!"

"He wouldn't harin a fly," assured Manton. "Notice his pose. Isn't it graceful? Now he can't help that. He'd stand on his head, if I told him."

The man behind the bar ran his fingers through his close-cropped red hair and appeared puzzled and suspicious. He began to think he was being made game of, and he did not like that at all.

"You don't believe me?" questioned Manton. "Well, just you watch him."

"Mike, put up that knife."

The ruffian did so without a protest.

"Get down on your hands and knees."

Mike obeyed.

"Stand on your head."

Mike made an attempt to obey and fell over on his back. Then he sat up, beginning to growl; but Manton silenced him by crying sternly:

"Be still, sir. Get on your knees."

The thug did so.

"Ask my pardon for attempting to stab me in the back."

It was evident the tough tried to disobey, but he was completely in the power of this wonderful man, and he was forced to do as Manton commanded.

"That is good," quietly said the detective, when it was over. "Get up."

Mike arose to his feet.

"Come up to the bar here at my left."

The entranced scoundrel walked up to the bar.

During all this time old Deadsure had not once turned his head to look full at Cadger Jim's pal, but now he wheeled on Mike, saying sharply:

"So you took a fancy to do me up? Didn't you know better than to fool with chain lightning? Do you know what you would have received had I given you your deserts?"

Mike mumbled, but his words were not intelligible.

"You would have received a bullet in your black heart," Old Burke went on. "I would have been justified in shooting you like the dastardly dog you are, but I spared you. Thank me for doing so."

"Thank you."

The words seemed forced from the lips of the desperado.

"Now, I have a few questions to ask," the detective went on. "First of all, who set you at me?"

"Myself."

"No one else?"

Mike hesitated.

"Speak the truth," sternly commanded Manton. "Who set you to this job?"

"Elegant Ell."

"I thought as much. I suppose you were ready and willing?"

"I don't love ye."

"Evidently not."

"I was willin' to square 'counts."

"What do you mean by squaring accounts?"

"Youse knocked us outer knockin' over the Western cove."

"Buckskin Dick?"

"Yes."

"So you were sore on that score? Who set you after Dick?"

"Man named Smith."

"So-so! That is interesting. Mr. John Smith?"

"Yes."

"What did he want the Westerner downed for?"

"Dunno."

"Did he pay you well?"

"Give us a hundred apiece, an' was to double it when we knocked the cuss over."

"I must say you hold life cheap! You were fools to tackle him on Broadway."

"We was leery."

Manton nodded.

"You must have been. As it was, you got off dead easy. Elegant Ell pulled you out, eh?"

"Yes."

"And he wants me downed?"

"He do."

"What was he going to give you for the trick?"

"Two hundred plunks."

"Are you one of the Snake Gang?"

"The w'at?"

"The Clan Gang, as they call themselves."

"Dunno northin' 'bout it."

Old Deadsure flashed a fiery look into the thug's eyes, fairly sending a shock to Mike's very toes.

"Are you speaking the truth?" Manton sternly demanded.

"So help me!" faltered the miserable wretch, trembling with an unknown fear.

The detective was disappointed, for he had hoped to obtain some of the secrets of the dastardly order from the entranced thug.

The barkeeper looked on with open-mouthed wonder, not yet able to comprehend what was taking place before his very eyes.

"Well, Slinky Mike," said Manton, calmly. "I am going to let you off easy this time, for I cannot afford to bother with you now; but I want to give you a fair warning, and I hope you will heed it, as it is for your own good. This is the second time I have shown you my power, and every time I attempt to govern you it will be easier to handle you. Next time, I will be able to make you do exactly as I command even though you do not see me at all and I do not look at you. You will not be able to disobey when you hear my voice. You understand?"

"Yes."

"And if you ever make another attempt on my life, I shall see that you get it where the chicken got the ax—square in the neck. Your picture is in Byrnes's little collection of famous beauties and the police are watching you. The first thing you know, you will go up for a good time time, or you will get a chance to rest yourself in the electrical chair up at Sing Sing. Now, take my advice and shake the dust of New York from your feet. Go somewhere out of the country—South America, Australia, Europe, anywhere. If you do not, you are bound to be raked over the jogger. Savvy?"

Mike nodded.

"That's all. Now git, and don't you stop short of the Battery."

The ruffian hustled out of the room without delay.

The red head behind the bar would have asked some questions, but Manton flashed the fellow a look that caused him to gasp and close up, and then the detective went on his way.

At Eighth street and Broadway he met Buckskin Dick.

The Westerner gave a cry of satisfaction the moment his eyes rested on Old Deadsure.

"Look here, pard," he said, "do you want to chin Jasper Van Dyke before he croaks?"

"Well, I would like to ask him a few questions."

"Then you have no time to lose."

"Why? Has he had a bad turn?"

"Yes, and mighty bad at that. The Doc reckons he'll cash his chips before morning."

Manton believed old Jasper could tell something of vast importance if he would talk, and he lost no time in engaging a cab to take him to the wounded man's home.

He was soon in the chamber of the doomed gentleman, who was feebly calling for Evan. Manton sat down by the bed and took old Jasper's thin hand.

"Be calm," he said, gently, and in a moment the sinking man was resting peacefully, soothed by the wonderful influence of the most famous detective known to New York.

"You will rest easier now," said Manton.

"Oh, I am much easier," was the answer.

"The pain has entirely left me since you came."

"Let me look in your eyes," requested Burke.

The sinking man turned his gaze upon the wonderful orbs of the mesmerist detective, and he was soon under Manton's influence.

"Now, I wish you to answer a few questions," gently spoke Old Deadsure. "If you feel in the slightest degree exhausted from your efforts, do not hesitate to tell me so."

At this moment, the physician, who had been out of the room for some seconds, returned. He uttered an exclamation of dismay at seeing Manton there, immediately saying:

"Sir, you will oblige me by stepping back. You will irritate Mr. Van Dyke. I wonder how it happens you are here? I gave orders to admit no one without my permission."

"Your orders cannot always be obeyed," was the calm retort. "The servant attempted to enforce them, but he changed his mind on being *persuaded*."

The doctor flushed.

"Such servants are not worthy of their position! Will you be good enough to retire from the bedside?"

Manton flashed a look at the physician, caught his eye, gazed at him steadily for ten seconds, then said:

"Will you be good enough to sit down in that chair and keep quiet, sir."

It was a command, and the doctor meekly obeyed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE AWAKENING TO LIFE AND LOVE.

"EVAN! EVAN! Oh, God! he is dead!"

Dimly, vaguely, as if from a distance, Evan Rodman heard those words. There was a great roaring in his ears, as of a mighty cataract, and somewhere in his person he felt a dull and throbbing pain. The blackness of night seemed to rest upon him, for

his eyelids were sealed as if with bands of steel.

He tried to think, but such a confusion seized upon him that he would have cried out had not his tongue seemed paralyzed and his abilities locked in the clasp of death. He wondered what had happened and where he could be, but no immediate answer came to the questions.

At times the roaring sound was mingled with music that was sweet to his soul, but it was very long before he realized the music was the murmuring voice of a female. It was sad, as well as sweet, with a sobbing sound that seemed to reach his feebly throbbing heart.

"Dead! dead—yes, he is dead!"

He believed he knew the voice, but it seemed a long time before he was certain. As he was trying to think when and where he had heard it before, he became aware that he was being kissed again and again by soft lips, that gentle hands were fondling him, and that the weight of another person was half-resting across his breast.

Somehow, strangely enough, he seemed to know the touch of those lips and those hands even better than the voice he had heard. There was a magnetism about them that brought back the life to his motionless body and started the blood to coursing once more in his veins. Still, he could not immediately stir or speak.

In time, he came to know the voice. It was Wilma's—Wilma, whom he felt that he had treated so shamefully! She was murmuring loving words in his apparently unhearing ears and she was kissing him again and again, as she sobbed out her heart-broken grief.

A feeling of remorse crept slowly over him. He knew she was good and true, and her murmuring words and tender caresses seemed to tell that she loved him still. Such love he felt he was not worthy of—such devotion he did not deserve.

How came she there? Where were they?

He realized he was reclining on a couch of some kind. The air about him seemed warm, and her breath fanned his cheek.

"They have killed him—the wretches!"

With that cry, the weight across his breast became heavier, and he imagined she had swooned.

Then he began to wonder if he was really dead. If not, why was he unable to stir his limbs?—why was it impossible for him to utter a word? Possibly he had died, but his spirit was still lingering in his inanimate body.

The thought was horrible enough, and he struggled desperately to move or utter some sound. It seemed that he almost succeeded.

Then he felt his companion start up, and he heard her cry:

"Did he move? Great Heavens! it almost seemed so! But he is so white—so still! I must have been deceived. He is dead—dead without one last word to me! And I have loved him so truly! Dead though he is, I love him still—love him all the more dearly! There is nothing now in life for me!"

Such words could not fail to bring action to him, if life remained in his body.

"Wilma!"

She had not discerned any movement of his lips, but she was almost certain the softly spoken word sounded in her ears. With a gasping cry of joy, she bent her head and devoured his face with her eyes.

"He lives! I am sure he spoke my name! Oh, Heaven! give him back to me!"

And then she was suddenly silent, for the whole bitter truth came to her with a terrible shock. For a few moments she sat pressing her hands to her throbbing temples, wildly staring down at him.

"What am I saying?" she hoarsely spoke. "Even if he lives, he will never come back to me! He loves me no more! We are parted forever, in life or death!"

The thought was bitter indeed. She was silent now—silent and rigid, as she knelt beside the couch on which he was stretched. Her heart was full of such agony as only comes to human beings who know they have lost the object dearest to them of all on earth.

And the man stretched there supinely was battling with a deadly lethargy which threatened to steal his senses from him again—a lethargy he feared must indeed be death.

Had he been alone, it is possible he would have succumbed; but the love of the fair girl kneeling so near him gave him strength to beat off the torpor.

"Wilma, darling!"

"He did speak!" she cried. "I saw his lips move—I can feel his heart beating faintly! He lives! Oh, God! I thank thee!"

Then his strength came, and he whispered:

"Such love as yours is enough to restore life to a corpse!"

His eyes had slowly opened and he was looking at her. The light which sifted through the grating of an iron-barred door showed her a great tenderness in his face.

But, now that he was conscious—now that his eyes were looking into hers—a strange sensation seized upon her. Even while her lips murmured her joyous thanks, she drew back fearfully, almost proudly.

"I thought you dead," she faltered.

"And are you pleased to know I am not?"

"How can you ask such a question?"

As he turned slowly toward her, she arose to her feet and stood there beside him. He made an effort to sit up, but his strength was far from equal to the task. He partially arose, and then, with a low moan, fell back limply, looking white and deathlike.

A cry of pain came from her lips, and she was instantly on her knees again. His eyes were closed, and he seemed unconscious.

"Oh, Heaven! Is this a swoon—is it nothing more? How pale he is!"

He felt her breath sweep across his face once more, and through his fluttering eyelids he saw her lips bend close to his.

With a sudden outlay of strength, he lifted his arms and placed them about her neck, drawing her down to him and kissing her mouth.

A little sob of perfect happiness escaped her, and for some seconds she permitted herself to rest thus in his arms. He tried to speak, but his whispers were broken and incoherent.

After a little, she gently drew back from his clasp. His eyes were open again and the color was beginning to creep slowly into his cheeks.

"Wilma," he murmured, "I believe I am happier now than I have been before, since—since—" He did not finish, but she understood what he would have said, and a sudden throb of pain dispelled all the joy she had felt in those last few seconds.

Again she arose to her feet.

"Do you know you are a captive in the hands of desperate men?" she asked.

"I only know *you* are here!" was his reply.

She half turned away, biting her lip. He could see she was trembling and trying to gain control of her nerves. He did not mind the throbbing pain which still remained in his head.

"I treated you brutally!" he confessed, with contrition. "I am ashamed of it."

It seemed as if he had made a mistake in speaking those words just then, for she drew herself up proudly.

"Will you kindly refrain from speaking of *that*, Mr. Rodman," she said, with an intonation that denoted command.

"Why shouldn't I speak of it when it is my duty? I am ashamed of myself, Wilma!"

He felt that his very earnestness gave him strength, and he essayed to sit up again. This time he was successful, although his head seemed whirling round and round for one moment and he was obliged to lower it into his hands, where he sat in a dejected and penitent attitude.

She looked at him, but she did not make a move toward him. His senses had returned, there was no danger of his dying, and now her spirit held firm and dignified.

As soon as he recovered from the vertigo of the moment, he straightened up, speaking again:

"Let's bury the past, Wilma. I am ready to beg pardon at your feet—I am ready to make any amend in my power."

She turned on him quickly, and he read something like scorn on her fair face.

"Are you so fickle as that?" she cried. "Have you forgotten your new love thus quickly? Evan Rodman, I thought you were a man *then*!"

Her words cut him to the heart, and he quailed before her eyes. Never before in all

his life had he felt so mean, so utterly insignificant, as at that moment. He knew he was deserving of her scorn, and he bowed humbly before it.

Yes, for the time, he had forgotten that such a person as Nadine Van Dyke existed! But now, all the bitterness, all the shame of his situation overpowered him. Was he a creature who did not know his own mind?

"Wilma, I swear—"

"Stop!" she cut him short. "Do not swear to me you never loved her! I am not ready to listen to such a declaration! You readily cast me over for her. Do you imagine you can as readily pick me up again? Do you fancy I am ready to stand second in your estimation?"

All his love for her seemed to come back, even though he was overwhelmed by her scornful words. He fancied she looked more beautiful than ever before as she stood proudly before him.

"Not second!" he quickly cried. "You are first! I see my folly now; I have been mad!"

Those words did not have the effect he desired.

"Are you thus changeable? Then were I to take you back as an accepted suitor, you would treat Miss Van Dyke as you treated me. Oh, Evan!"

He felt the reproach keenly, and, now that his blood flowed once more in his veins, he knew his cheeks were burning.

"She has no claim on me, Wilma, believe me. True, I sought to win her love, but she repulsed me. There was another—But, I cannot explain it all now."

The task was indeed hopeless. How could he make her understand about Nadine's double? It were better not to make the attempt.

"You put an end to the bond that held us together, Evan. Such a bond when broken is not so easily mended."

"Still, you love me!"

"I—"

"Please don't deny it, Wilma. As I lay here, unable to move hand or foot—unable to even open my eyes—I felt your kisses and heard your murmured words."

She had been pale, but now her face was crimson. For some moments, she could not utter a word. He went on:

"That was enough to tell me your love was not dead—that was enough to bring home to my heart the truth that I loved you still—have ever loved you! I deceived myself in thinking otherwise."

She turned from him and walked to the grated door, peering out into the passage where hung the lamp. Up to that moment, Evan had scarcely noted his surroundings, but now, with a feeling of wonder, he observed the place was not entirely unfamiliar. The door, the cell, the lamp beyond the iron bars—he had seen all before.

Like a flash, the truth came to him.

He was a captive in the hands of the Snake Gang! Again he was in the power of the Scarlet Woman!

But even that discovery was not enough to banish the thought that Wilma, the girl he truly loved, had turned from him with mingled scorn and pity.

All at once, she faced about again.

"I thank you for coming to my aid, Evan," she said.

That set him to thinking how it all came about. He remembered the old hotel by the East River—remembered the two figures slinking through the darkness and the bundle they carried—remembered the struggle in the upper story of the ramshackle building. He had heard Wilma's cries for help and rushed to her rescue. Instead of saving her, he had been sandbagged into unconsciousness, and now they were both captives in the power of the worst band of crooks that ever cursed that locality.

He almost fancied there was a touch of sarcasm in her thanks.

"I did my best," he declared. "God knows I would it had been better!"

"Don't think I reproach you!" was her quick entreaty. "Far from such a thing! I can never forget how nobly you leaped at those two ruffians! You sent one of them reeling with a blow. It was the other who struck you down."

"I failed to save you! I can never forgive myself for that!"

"No man can do better than his best. When I cried for aid, I little dreamed you would answer the call."

"No more did I dream of seeing you there. I do not understand it even now. How did it come about?"

She did not hesitate to explain.

"I was visiting a poor woman who lies ill in a rather poor quarter of the city. I have been helping her right along for some weeks, and I promised to surely come and see her to-day. It was very late before I got around. I left the carriage at her door and ascended to the room where she had been since I saw her first. She was not there, but the two ruffians into whose hands I fell occupied the room. They told me the woman had been removed to Bellevue. When I started to leave, one of the men grabbed me and clapped his hand over my mouth. Then the other sprang to the aid of his companion. I fought with all my strength and managed to utter one cry. That filled them with alarm, and they forced a dirty gag into my mouth. Then fearing the cry would bring an investigation and knowing my carriage stood at the door, they hurriedly carried me out of the building by a back way. It was already growing dark, and they hid near hand until they could bear me away in safety. When I realized how hopeless I was in their power, I must have fainted. I knew no more until I broke from them in some kind of an old building and ran for life, crying for aid. You answered my call."

"What happened after I was knocked over?"

"I must have fainted again, for I do not know. The next that I remember, I was here in this prison-like pen, and you were stretched on the couch, apparently lifeless. What will become of us?"

"They shall not harm you, Wilma!" cried Evan. "While I have strength and life, I will defend you!"

"Very prettily said!" laughed a sarcastic voice.

A key rattled in the lock, the grated door swung open, and the Scarlet Woman stood before them!

CHAPTER XXXII.

FACING DEATH.

"You seem to be something of a gay deceiver, my dear boy," mocked the Queen of the Clan. "I might designate you as a regular heart-crusher. It does not seem to take you many hours to sift off the old love and don the new."

She did not wear her flaming mask, and never had she looked more sinfully beautiful than at that moment.

With a cry of amazement Wilma exclaimed:

"Miss Van Dyke!"

"Ha! ha!" laughed the Woman in Scarlet. "You are also deceived by the resemblance. But for that infernal detective I might have played the game successfully! Oh, the time will come when I will even up with Old Deadsure!"

Wilma did not understand her.

"Evan," she cried, "is not this your cousin?"

"No!—a thousand times no!"

This seemed to please the Queen, for she showed her perfect teeth in a smile, observing:

"You see he is very emphatic. Best of all, he is right. Thank fortune I am not that puny, sniveling, weak-spirited doll-baby! She has done nothing but weep and wail ever since she fell into my hands."

"Wretched woman!" almost thundered Evan, his hands clinched and his whole body trembling. "If you have harmed one hair of her head, you shall suffer for it!"

The Scarlet Woman flung out one hand with a gesture of satisfaction.

"So that touches you where it is tender! And still you were making love to this girl a few moments ago! You should be a Mormon, dear Evan."

He made no retort to this, but she saw the disdain in his face.

"Is it possible you think so little of me, when not so very many hours ago you were holding me in your arms and entreating me to become your wife?" she questioned.

"I was a fool!"

"Think so? Am I not as beautiful as

your cousin? Am I not as beautiful as that girl there? From what I overheard as I listened outside, I do not fancy you will be taken back by her. You cast her over, and she is not ready to be trifled with any more. Last night you asked me to become your wife. I was not ready then, but I am ready now."

He fell back, his face paling.

"Do you think I would marry you?"

Never words expressed greater aversion.

"I think you will!"

"Then you think *wrong*! I would sooner wed a viper! You are a viper—a human serpent! Your hands are stained with blood!"

The crimson tide of anger mounted to her face.

"Have a care!" she hissed. "Do not arouse me, or it will cost you dear!"

"You murderer!"

She trembled with her great anger.

"That is enough! You have sealed your own doom!"

She placed a silver whistle to her lips and blew a quick blast. In a moment, several dark-robed figures appeared and filed soberly into the cell. Their faces were hidden by the black cowls.

With a gasp of dismay, Wilma shrunk close to Evan's side. He slipped his arm about her waist, as he faced the somber members of the Clan, his head lifted, his eyes flashing defiance.

"Do you see that man?" and the pointing finger of the Queen was directed toward Evan Rodman.

The dark-robed men bowed.

"Grasp him—bear him to the Chamber of Doom!"

Then they advanced on Evan, who promptly swung Wilma behind him, setting his teeth hard together, and preparing to battle to the end, for all of the desperate odds.

"You may as well submit peacefully," called the Scarlet Woman.

"Submit—never!"

"Then at him—down him!"

They obeyed her command, flinging themselves upon the undaunted young man.

Evan struck a few telling blows, and two of the rascals were neatly knocked over. But there were too many for him. Slowly and surely he was forced backward, fighting fiercely all the while.

With clasped hands, Wilma had staggered to the couch, on which she sunk, while she watched the fearful conflict with staring eyes.

It did not last long. Evan was beaten down and overpowered, although struggling to the last.

"Bring along the girl," commanded the Queen, and then she departed.

Securely bound, Evan was carried from the place, while Wilma, despairing and disheartened, was led along between two of the dark-robed ruffians.

In a few moments they entered a room that was fully lighted and hung with curtains of somber black.

This was known as the "Chamber of Doom."

The Scarlet Woman was already there. She was seated on a raised chair that was draped in black, and now her face was hidden by a crimson mask. She spoke no word as they entered, but motioned them, with a wave of her hand, to positions before her.

Other masked and cloaked figures came in, and a dead silence reigned as one, who seemed to be a sort of judge, stood up near the Queen and said:

"Evan Rodman, you have mortally offended our Queen, for which reason I am called upon to pronounce the sentence of death upon you. You had better make your peace with the Power Above, for within five minutes you are to be shot dead in this chamber!"

Not a word did Evan utter, but there was a sneering, derisive smile on his face. It seemed that he almost doubted their intention to carry such a thing into execution.

As for Wilma, she was rendered dumb with horror. She did not shriek or utter any sound, but it seemed that a dart of fire pierced her very heart.

If Evan doubted the intention of the black band his doubts were soon dispelled. Lots were drawn and the executioners stepped

aside. Then two men led him across the chamber and placed his back against the wall. He stood up unflinchingly, calmly facing what seemed certain death.

Then, for the first time, Wilma uttered a cry. She would have rushed to him, but strong hands held her fast.

"Executioners, take your positions!" commanded the judge.

The somber men obeyed, and pistols were in their hands. Evan's face was pale, but he showed no signs of flinching.

Not a word came from the lips of the Scarlet Woman, but she leaned forward, breathlessly watching every move. If she expected the doomed man to beg for mercy, she was disappointed.

"Ready, executioners!"

The five men in black lifted the pistols in their hands and pointed them at the man with his back against the wall.

"Take aim!"

A moment of silence.

"Fire at the word. *One!*"

Not a breath was to be heard.

"*Two!*"

A brief pause, and then—

"*Three!*"

The word was now finished.

A wild shriek rung through the chamber, and then a female figure darted in at one of the doors, flew like a bird across the floor and flung herself on the breast of the captive, crying:

"Fire, and I will die with him!"

It was Nadine Van Dyke!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE WILD GIRL'S SECRET.

AN exclamation of anger and dismay, softly muttered, came from the hidden lips of the masked Queen. She made an imperious motion, and one of the cloaked figures hurried to her side. A few words, guardedly spoken, were uttered, and then the man turned back.

"Nadine!" cried Evan.

"Evan!" came from her lips, as she clung to him.

"Don't be foolish, cousin mine!" urged the young man. "You cannot save me. Stand aside and let the dastardly dogs go on with their work!"

"Never! If they shoot you, their bullets must pass through my body!"

Such devotion stirred his heart to its utmost depths. He fancied he could see traces of her suffering on her pale face and in her brown eyes. Her tangled hair was streaming down her back, and her dress was torn and tattered in many places. He had no thought for himself just then; every thought was of her and what she had passed through.

"Have they harmed you?" he asked, fiercely. "If they have—"

He stopped, fully realizing the helplessness of his situation.

"Oh, I can do nothing!" came from him in a groan.

Wilma was not forgotten, but the natural chivalry of his nature demanded his sympathy for Nadine, who had suffered so much and who had protected him with her body.

The executioners still stood straight up before them, but the deadly pistols had been lowered, as the signal to fire was yet to be spoken.

Wilma saw all, and a great pain pierced her heart. Oh, how willingly she would have protected him with her own body—would even have flung herself on his breast and died with him! But strong hands held her, and she did not have the opportunity to rush to him.

Something was going on among the dark-robed men, for the one who had consulted the Scarlet Woman was moving swiftly about, and there were signs of mild surprise.

"I have not been harmed," said Nadine, "but I have suffered so much! Oh, it seems that ages have passed since I fell into the hands of these dreadful creatures!"

"And I can do nothing to save you!" regretfully groaned the young man. "The thought is terrible!"

"Wait!" whispered Nadine. "Perhaps I can save you."

"Impossible!"

"Maybe not."

"How can it be done?"

"I will kneel at the feet of their Queen and entreat that you be spared."

"Don't do it!" he quickly cried. "I would rather die than see you humble yourself before that woman of sin!"

"Ah! but life is sweet, and you have so much to live for! You must live—for my sake!"

No words she could have uttered would cut him so deeply. He felt that he was hopelessly entangled between the two girls, and, if he lived, he must bring pain and sorrow to the heart of one of them.

"I deserve death!" he muttered.

One of the dark-robed figures came forward.

"The Queen is very angry," declared the man, fixing his eyes on Nadine. "She thought you safe in the room allotted to you. Now that you have come here and seem eager to die, she says you shall have your wish."

The girl stood up bravely, but Evan hoarsely demanded:

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say: she is to die with you!"

"Dastardly dogs!" shouted Evan, as he struggled with all his strength to burst the bonds that held him fast. "Murderous hounds! If my hands were free!"

"But they are not," calmly observed the man. "It is useless for you to try to break away. We took good care to make you secure."

"Would you murder an innocent girl?"

"We do not call it murder—it is simple execution."

"My God! To think such things can be in this enlightened age and in New York City!"

And then he thought of Wilma—his eyes sought her out. He saw her standing in the grasp of her detainers, her white face turned toward him, her eyes full of pity.

At the moment when he had thought he would feel the bullets of the executioners in another second he had not suffered so much as he did then. Death was not so hard as to think that his innocent and beautiful cousin must be butchered by the murderous gang and that Wilma would be left in the hands of those men, ruled by a Queen whose scarlet apparel was a flaming emblem of her sinful life.

He could say no more, but his strong teeth were ground together fiercely and he quivered in every part of his body.

"Will it be so very hard to die with me, dear Evan?" murmured the girl who was still clinging to him.

He did not hear her—he was looking over her head at the face of the one who was to be left behind.

"It will be quickly over," Nadine softly breathed. "All I ask is that they bury us together in one grave!"

She thought he loved her still. It would be cruel, brutal to undecieve her.

"As you think so much of each other," spoke the man in the black robe, "the Queen has decided to give you one hour together before you die. You will be placed in a locked and guarded room and led forth at the expiration of the hour."

With a broken cry, Nadine sunk swooning to the ground.

Dare, intent upon duty, had tracked Hump Bodley to the old deserted hotel down by the river. There the deformed mysteriously vanished.

The spy found his way into the old building and searched it from top to bottom, but he discovered no trace of the hunchback, nor could he tell whither the ugly rascal had gone.

"Well, I am smart!" muttered Dare, disgusted at the thought of being tricked in such a manner. "He gave me the slip without a struggle. And I call myself a crack shadower!"

He laughed shortly, and, to his astonishment and alarm, the laugh was echoed from the darkness. In a moment, he exposed a tiny dark-lantern and flashed its light in the direction from whence the sound had seemed to come.

"Do you see me?" inquired a feminine voice. "I am here—oh, I am here! They thought they had killed me, but I still live. Some day I shall know my own name and all about myself. When I do—"

The sentence was not finished, and Dare saw the Wild Girl of the streets standing before him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"What are *you* doing here?" was her instant retort.

"Business brought me here."

She laughed shrilly.

"I know your business," was her declaration. "He gave you the slip, didn't he?"

"Who?"

"The little devil with the hump on his back."

"What do you know of him?"

"I know where he went!"

He turned the light full on her face.

"Do you mean it?"

"I do. You think me crazy; but I'm not so crazy as you imagine. I have simply forgotten some things. But, oh, I have not forgotten the man and the woman who made me what I am!"

Her white teeth gleamed, and she uttered the final words in a manner that sent a chill along the spine of Old Deadsure's assistant.

"You have been wronged?"

"Yes, and the woman who did it! All is down there!" She pointed downward with her hand.

"Down where?"

"In a secret retreat of her own, with her minions about her. But they shall not save her from the hand of justice when the time comes! Something tells me the time is very near!"

Dare could not make out how much of her talk was the ranting of a deranged person, but for some reason, he felt that it was worth listening to.

"What has this to do with the hunchback?" he asked.

"He went down there."

"Then he—"

"He is one of her ready tools."

"Can you show me where he went?"

"I can."

"Will you?"

"You are Manton Burke's friend?"

"I am his trusted assistant."

"And you will help me in bringing this woman of wickedness to justice?"

"I will."

"Then I will show you where the hunchback went. I know a way to get into the hiding-place of this band of city moles—a way they do not dream about. Come."

He followed her, one hand gripping the butt of a revolver, ready for anything that might happen.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

INTO THE UNDERGROUND DEN.

Less than an hour later, the little spy was flying from that locality as fast as his legs would carry him.

"If I can find Burke, the Snakes will be in custody before dawn!" he muttered.

It seemed that fortune stood with him, for he soon came upon Buckskin Dick. The man from the West told Dare how Manton had gone to Jasper Van Dyke's home on Fifth avenue.

"Then not a moment is to be lost!" exclaimed Old Deadsure's assistant. "If you desire to take a hand in some hot work, come with me."

"Hot work is my picnic," retorted the Westerner. "You can count me in with both feet, pard!"

Manton had just obtained from the lips of old Jasper a most wonderful and startling revelation when Dare reached the house.

The detective released the wounded man from the spell of his power, and then joined the spy in another room.

"Are you ready to scoop in the Snake Gang?" asked Dare.

"Ready the moment their hide-out is found."

"Then come with me."

"What do you mean?"

"I have found it!"

Old Burke was astounded, but he knew Dare was not the person to jest, and a few minutes later the two were in a cab with Buckskin Dick.

"You have found the retreat of the crooks?" said Burke, questioningly.

"Yes; holed them down by the East River, near Water street."

"What sort of a place is it?"

"A regular underground den."

"How did you find it?"

"Tracked Hump Bodley to the old East River Hotel. There he gave me the slip."

Deadsure was greatly interested.

"And that was where I saw the last of Evan Rodman. Told him to go over to the hotel while I found a boat to search beneath the piers. When I tried to find him, he was gone."

"He is a captive in the hands of the crooks."

"How do you know?"

"I saw him."

"Go on with your story."

"Well, the hunchback gave me the slip. While I was prowling about in search for him, a strange, wild-appearing girl made her presence known."

"The Wild Girl of the streets."

"She claimed to know just where the hunchback had gone. I did not really take a great deal of stock in her at first, but when she offered to show me the retreat of the underground gang I did not refuse to accompany her. She took me down into a section of the old hotel cellar that is filled with old barrels and boxes. Pulling away some of the boxes, she exposed an opening that led under the street. She entered, and I followed. We must have crossed to the opposite side of the street when she took out some bricks in a wall, and through the aperture we could look into the underground retreat of the Snakes. I am sure it is beneath some building, but I did not have time to study out its exact location. As we were peering through, we saw Evan Rodman and a girl escorted along by a mob of cloaked and hooded men. The young man's hands were bound behind his back, and I did not get a fair look at the girl's face."

"Pard!" cried Buckskin Dick, in delight, "that's the hole of the measly gang that had so much fun with me!"

Deadsure nodded.

"Without doubt. If nothing happens, we will have some fun with them before morning."

He then leaned out of the window and instructed the driver to take them direct to Police Headquarters.

"If everything goes well, this night will see the breaking up of one of the most dangerous gangs known to New York since the dissolution of the Whyos," said Manton.

He knew how to work swiftly, and dawn was yet a long distance away when he led a strong and well-armed band of blue-coats down to the old hotel by the East River.

Evan Rodman and Nadine were alone in the room where they had been thrust by the crooks. For some time they were silent; then the young man said:

"Cousin, will you untie my hands?"

She did so. He felt her soft fingers tugging at the stout cord for some time before it was released, but success crowned her efforts at last.

"You are free."

Free! The word was a mockery!

"I wish I were!" he cried. "Oh, but I would be satisfied if I had a brace of loaded revolvers! I would make a thinning out of this dastardly gang before they carried their infernal purpose into execution!"

She put her arms about him.

"We will die together, dear Evan!"

He shrunk back from her touch!

"Don't!" he cried.

She seemed astounded.

"What do you mean? Have you so much aversion for me? Oh, Evan!"

A sob came from her lips and she buried her face in her hands. He placed a hand on her arm and felt her trembling violently.

"Nadine, I am not worthy of your love!" Like a flash, she turned on him.

"You mean you no longer love me!"

He was silent for a moment, and then he said:

"I do not mean that, for I do love you—as a cousin."

"And that is the bitterest thing you could say when I have just learned to love you so truly—so dearly! It was a long and bitter fight. At first, I was not sure I loved you at all, but since I have been held a captive in the hands of these wretches, I have done nothing but think of you. Slowly and surely I have come to understand how dear you

are to me. And now, just when I understand my own heart, you turn from me!"

He felt guilty—he felt wretched.

"Cousin mine, you are the bravest and best little girl in all the wide world—with a single exception. Stop! Do not be angry! Hear me out, and then I will listen to anything you may say. You stood by me nobly when I was accused of being a thief, and you protected me from the bullets of these desperadoes with your own precious body. Do not imagine me ungrateful. Oh, I realize I am not worthy such love! But there is one to whom I was devoted before I saw you. I was cruel in turning from her, and I fear I did not fully know my own heart. So I am—"

"Say no more!" she cut in, with bitterness. "I thoroughly understand you. There is nothing in life for me now! I would not escape the death by which we are threatened, if I could!"

In vain he tried to explain; in vain he tried to cheer her a little. She seemed turned to stone. Neither of them seemed to know when the men of the underground Clan came in upon them. The first that they realized was that strong hands grasped them and a voice said:

"Time is up! The hour is ended and the execution must take place!"

Evan made no resistance as they were led forth. He seemed dazed, and he did not notice when his hands were bound behind him.

Back to the Chamber of Doom they were taken.

Then Nadine, all at once, broke from the hands that held her and flung herself at the feet of the Scarlet Woman, pleading for mercy.

Scarcely had she uttered a word when into the chamber sprang twenty blue-coated figures.

"Surrender!" thundered the voice of Old Deadsure.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE END OF THE SNAKES.

ALTHOUGH taken by surprise, many of the gang slipped away and fled into the secret passage that led down beneath the pier. Very little resistance was made. The surprise was so overwhelming that the gang seemed dazed.

The Scarlet Woman attempted to escape, but was easily secured.

The most astonishing thing was that Nadine Van Dyke attempted to slip away, but was detained by some of the policemen.

The officers ransacked the place, and soon brought forth a man who had been held a prisoner by the Gang. Evan Rodman instantly recognized him.

It was the mysterious Mr. Smith!

Buckskin Dick recognized him also.

"Ah, Lucky Luke!" cried the Westerner; "I knew we would meet again some day!"

Smith was indeed the man for whom Dick had been making a city hunt. He did not deny it, but, pointing straight at Nadine Van Dyke, he cried:

"There is the woman who brought me to this!"

A change had come over the shrinking and modest-like girl. She faced them all with an air of brazen bravado.

"The game seems to be played out," she observed, with a laugh. "The cards ran wrong."

"Nadine!" cried Evan Rodman, in wonder.

"Not Nadine!" asserted Old Deadsure.

"This is the Scarlet Woman!"

"Then who is that?" and the young man pointed at the one who had posed as the Queen. "She is the exact double of Nadine."

"Think you so?" smiled Manton. "Then behold how mistaken you are!"

He removed the mask from the face of the Woman in Scarlet, and it was seen that she did not resemble the one they had known as Nadine Van Dyke.

"From the lips of the man this woman murdered," said the Deadsure Detective, "I learned the truth. The girl known as Nadine Van Dyke is *not* his daughter. The old man's mind has been deranged for many years, but his best friends have never suspected it. He placed his daughter in a con-

vent and refused to look on her face again until she was eighteen—the act of a madman. The convent burned and the girl disappeared. He sought to trace her, although he did not let any one know about it. He succeeded in tracing her to her grave. She had died or been murdered. This woman claimed to have taken care of her during her last illness. It happened that the old man was taken ill, and she cared for him. She seemed tender and kind, and, as he had no daughter living, he proposed that she return East with him and live as his daughter. He told her no living person should ever know but she was his true daughter, and he would make her wealthy when he died. She consented. He did not dream what a wretched creature she was, but when he fell, shot down by her hand, the clouds cleared from his brain. I learned the truth from his lips."

"And she is the thief who has been troubling society people so long!" declared Smith, or Lucky Luke, to call him by his Western title. "I was living with her when she poisoned the real Nadine Van Dyke. I know not why she did it, unless it was because I was kind to the poor girl, who did not even know where her father lived or anything about him. She threw me over and left with the old man, but I followed her to New York. I had a hold on her, and she promised to work me into society if I would aid her in her robberies. I agreed. I do not know how she succeeded, but she secured an invitation for me at Wolford's. It was there I did my first work. I stole the necklace from Miss Sargent and slipped it to the woman who put me up to the job. When I was accused, she flew to Evan Rodman, and I knew she had slipped the jewels into his pocket, in order to get rid of them. Then I turned the tables on him. She stood up for him boldly, and, naturally, she was not suspected. That is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"You need not make oath to it, Lukie," cut in the woman. "I have no idea of denying anything, for I see it would be a case of wasted breath. It is all true."

"And you," cried Buckskin Dick, striding forward, "are my treacherous wife!"

She nodded.

"I am. That is, I was married to you. You thought me an innocent girl of nineteen when I was a woman of nearly thirty. But, I knew the tricks—I know 'em still. Why, I have fooled and puzzled all who have had anything to do with me. When you came on me as I was playing the innocent dodge of Nadine, I knew something must be done to satisfy you you had made an error. For that reason, you were captured, while I posed first as the Scarlet Woman and then as Nadine the innocent. That woman aided me in carrying out the trick, and it was all done by swift changes of clothing. You will remember that when Nadine was visible the Queen of the Clan was masked and did not speak very often. In that way, I made you think the gentle Nadine really had a double who was a wicked and terrible woman. I made you believe you had greatly wronged Nadine. Oh, what fools you were!"

"When my trick was exposed by the detective, I did not hesitate to shoot. Unfortunately, I hit Mr. Van Dyke, for which I am truly sorry. I thought the whole game was ruined then, but when two of our men brought me Evan Rodman, I resolved to try it over again, in a different way. Unfortunately, he had whiffled back to his first love, and it was necessary for me to show my absolute devotion for him in order to carry out my plans. I had not the least idea in the world of having him shot. The whole affair was carefully planned and carried out according to orders. At the last moment, I was going to have it appear that the Queen gave us another respite, and then I would arrange it some way so that we could escape—apparently, taking Miss Wilcox along. Ten hours from now, the Snakes would have been in new quarters, and the police would have descended on this place to find it empty."

"But Old Deadsure got ahead of me. All my nice little scheme is ruined."

"And the blood of the true Nadine Van Dyke is on your soul!" said Old Burke, solemnly.

"No!" cried a ringing voice. "Nadine

Van Dyke did not die! The clouds have cleared away; I know myself now! I am Nadine!"

It was the Wild Girl of the streets!

The Snake Gang is no more. The organization was wiped out at a single blow, and the captured ones were fitly punished. The "Scarlet Woman" swallowed enough poison to keep her from prison. No one mourned her death.

Strangely enough, Jasper Van Dyke recovered from his wounds and lived nearly a year. His real daughter was restored to him, her identity being proven with very little trouble.

It was impossible for her to ever tell exactly how she had escaped death. The fearful experience through which she had passed had partially unbalanced her mind and robbed her of memory.

Buckskin Dick's city hunt was ended, and he was glad to return to Colorado. He no longer held a feeling of enmity toward Luke the gambler, but that worthy, who had threatened the Scarlet Woman and been held captive by her, was given a term in prison.

Hump Bodley, Biff Jones and others who were connected with the Clan received their deserts.

Unfortunately, Elegant Ell, the Prince of New York Crooks escaped by the passage; but he fled the country and has never returned.

Mike and the Cadger are both "doing time."

It was long months before Evan Rodman was reinstated in Wilma Wilcox's favor, but he finally won his way back, and their engagement terminated in a marriage announcement. Evan really feels that he has secured more happiness than he deserves.

Dare is making a reputation, and Manton Burke—"Old Deadsure"—although resting on his oars just at present, is always willing to take a hand in any tough tussle with crooks, and his terrible eyes are more feared by them than the combined force of any other twenty independent detectives.

THE END.

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